

**Patriarchy Stress Disorder: The  
Invisible Inner Barrier to Women's  
Happiness and Fulfillment**

by Valerie Rein, PhD

# Introduction

*When we see the invisible, we can do the impossible.*

—Anonymous

I was on the phone with a client when I suddenly noticed I was only smiling with one half of my face.

The right side of my mouth lifted up, but the left side wasn't cooperating. By the time I got off the phone, my left arm wasn't working, either. It just hung there. I thought, *that's funky. What's going on?* With my right thumb, I typed "weakness on the left side of the body" into my phone. I read the word *stroke*. I got in my car, and using my right arm, I drove myself to the emergency room.

Within minutes, I was hooked up to what felt like every beeping and monitoring device they could find. Thus began a multi-hour adventure to understand what was wrong with me. As I was examined and tested, I progressively felt better. I was being taken care of. The staff wheeled me around on a stretcher through the doors that opened automatically. They covered me with blankets before entering a cold room. They brought me water before I had to ask. They waited on me hand and foot and smiled reassuringly. I felt like I was at the Ritz-Carlton—the only other place on earth where I'd ever experienced my needs reliably and consistently met and anticipated.

There were no calls to answer. No one to take care of. There were no demands on me. Except to lay there and breathe. I was guilt-free; possibly for the first time as a mother, wife, and professional. A stroke scare quailed at me for a hall pass.

Surrounded by the soft meditative beeping of the machines, I began to relax and enjoy my spa day in a hospital gown.

Thankfully, all the test results came back normal. It was “just stress” that had taken my left side temporarily offline. They let me check out to go home.

I looked at the clock and realized I could still make my evening client appointments. I changed into my civilian clothes, drove to my office, and held my evening sessions as though nothing had ever happened.

Such is the power of the status quo. If I wasn't dead, I was working.

*Can you relate?*

Countless high-achieving female clients over the years have shared with me about their burnout, their frustration, disillusionment, despair, rage, depression, adrenal fatigue, issues with weight, digestion, and sleep, panic, and anxiety.

*“I grapple with a constant feeling of overall exhaustion, because I feel like I always have to just keep dancing.”*

*“I'm afraid of failure. I have to be the best at all times, and always be pleasant and leave everyone smiling.”*

*“I wake up anxious. My heart and my mind are racing at the thought of everything I need to do. I force myself to meditate, but it doesn't really work, and I feel like a failure.”*

*“I just want to wake up in the morning feeling happy.”*

It was easier to see in them what I was struggling to see in myself. We high-achieving women keep pushing until we break, until we're stopped dead in our

tracks by crises in our health, work, or relationships. Only when we're up against a wall do we finally see the prison we're in.

But what is this invisible inner prison? And what crimes got us there?

## Redefining Trauma

Over the years of my work as a therapist and in social conversations, I've been hearing women express the feeling of being stuck, imprisoned. Women talked about wanting more—more intimacy in their relationship, more impact of their work in the world, more fulfillment in life, feeling more comfortable in their skin, more peace and happiness. They expressed frustration, feeling like as they try reach for this *more*, they are running into an invisible inner wall.

These women did not just spend their lives daydreaming. For years, they worked hard on doing everything our culture told us we've got to do to earn our happiness and fulfillment. Be a good girl. Do well in school. Work hard on your career. Get married. Buy a house. Raise children. Own nice things. Take vacations.

And when checking off these milestones on the map did not take them to the promised land, they looked within. They read self-help books, attended personal growth workshops, seminars, and retreats, tried yoga and meditation, as well as therapy and medication. And still they were not where they wanted to be.

Before my stroke scare, like all of my clients and other high-achieving women I knew, I was rocking the prison life. From the outside looking in, I had it all: a thriving private psychology practice in New York and a global coaching and consulting business. Two graduate degrees in Psychology (yes, I was *that* troubled)—a Master's from Columbia University and a PhD from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. I had a prestigious job at a major University and taught in a Master's in Counseling program. I married a good man, had a wonderful daughter, and bought a nice house in a suburb of New York City.

The ER episode pierced through the nice facade of “having it all.” I was confronted by the fact that I did not *feel* as happy and fulfilled as I looked on paper. I finally began to catch the glimpse of my invisible inner prison. When one half of my body fell silent, I finally began to listen to the parts of myself that I had been too afraid to hear from before.

I began wondering: How come my clients were making these big shifts in their lives? They were transforming their careers, businesses, health, and relationships. From being at the mercy of anxiety, anger, and addictions—to joy, peace, and contentment as their new normal. While I still felt stuck. What was I doing for them that I was not doing for myself?

And then it dawned on me. With all of my clients, I was using mind-body tools for trauma healing. Even with those who did not think they had any unresolved trauma. Inevitably, when we took a closer look under the hood of what was driving anxiety, depression, feeling lonely in her marriage or trouble meeting a partner and creating a fulfilling relationship, difficulty with arousal and orgasms, unwanted weight gain or loss, self-soothing with food or alcohol and other addictive behaviors—we found trauma.

The reason I was not doing it for myself was... *I did not think I had any trauma.*

Ironic, I know. But you can probably relate to my confusion. In fact, you may be thinking that *you* don't have any trauma.

The reason is that the conventional definition of trauma ties it to witnessing or experiencing a life-threatening event. It makes us think of combat, rape, and domestic violence. But why then all these people who've never experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event had symptoms of trauma and responded so well to mind-body tools for healing it?

Because they're human, like you and I. My experience of being human and helping humans heal has clearly shown me that *all* humans have trauma.

Others before me have recognized that most kinds of trauma, in fact, do not fit into the narrow conventional definition. Trauma-healing practitioners distinguish between the capital T and the lowercase t kinds of trauma. Among the latter are adverse childhood experiences and many other events humans commonly go through that often result in lasting traumatic effects.

My personal and professional journey has led me to broaden the definition of the lowercase t trauma even more. I define trauma this way:

Trauma is any experience that made you feel unsafe in your fullest authentic expression and led to developing trauma adaptations to keep you safe.

This includes any event that caused you to dim your light, any situation that made you withdraw from being fully yourself. This circumstance might have come in the form of an insult, a glare, an offhand comment that you're too big for your britches, or unwanted sexual attention. If thinking of it now makes you shrink a little inside, it's probably trauma.

Trauma adaptations are protective mechanisms that are created in response to trauma. They're meant to keep us safe, and they do so by keeping in an invisible inner prison. The prison walls are made of the traumatic experiences, and trauma adaptations act like prison guards. They operate in our minds, bodies, and actions—creating thoughts, physical challenges, and self-sabotaging behaviors that block us from moving forward and experiencing what we truly desire.

# “Stop Holding Yourself Back!” and “What’s Wrong with Me?”

Much like Rapunzel’s Mother Gothel, the prison guards convince us that staying locked up is the only way to stay safe from the dangerous world out there. An important note: Most trauma defenses operate on the subconscious level.

Consciously, we may feel very confident, competent, and not at all think of the world as dangerous. However, the trauma imprints in our bodies and minds activate the defense systems regardless of what we consciously believe. These are the invisible walls that we run into when we reach for *more*—more happiness, intimacy, or impact—because the vulnerability they require touches the original trauma, making us feel unsafe. When our traumas get triggered, the walls go up and stop us dead in our tracks.

You may have heard the awful slogan popularized by the self-help, “self-improvement,” personal development, motivational speaking, and coaching industries that implores you to “Stop holding yourself back!” What makes this phrase so awful is that it suggests that people—mostly women, who make up at least 70 percent of the self-help market<sup>1</sup>—are consciously choosing to hold themselves back. It puts us on the hamster wheel of “self-improvement,” where we keep trying our hardest and running our fastest to “stop holding ourselves back.”

This is as futile as it is heartbreaking. The most painful casualty of this race is our confidence—because no matter how hard we try and how fast we run, we don’t seem to be able to succeed at “not holding ourselves back.” We’re left with the shame of yet another perpetual failure, pondering the patriarchy-old question every woman habitually asks herself: “What’s wrong with me?”

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<sup>1</sup> “The Market for Self-Improvement Products and Services,” *Market Data Enterprises*, 2017.

I wrote this book to show you that there's *nothing* wrong with you and that you're *not* holding yourself back.

What's holding us back is the invisible prison of trauma lodged in our subconscious. It's not your doing, it's not your failing, and it's not something that's "wrong" with you. It's not a "mindset" issue that you need to "fix." Holding us back is how the trauma prison operates. Self-help hacks not only fail as a lasting solution—they typically backfire. The only way out of the invisible inner prison is to uncover and heal the trauma that erected it.

Let this sink in. For me, my clients, and every other high-achieving woman I've talked to about wanting more and running into an invisible wall, our suffering is exacerbated by our shame about feeling this way. Maybe you, too, are exhausted from having to fend off the shame attacks along the lines of "What's wrong with me, why can't I just snap out of it?" "I have a good life, why can't I just be happy? What's wrong with me?" Maybe you, too, have been coping with the pain by numbing it with work, food, drinks, shopping, social media, or streaming shows. Maybe for you, too, this coping has been giving rise to more shame and more agonized questioning: "Why can't I just put down the spoon and put the ice cream back in the freezer? What's wrong with me?"

"What's wrong with me?" is the question a woman asks herself again and again. We feel alone in our suffering. Because other women don't talk about theirs. Because they are ashamed, too. Because they "should" be happy—their lives are so good. Which confirms our worst fears, that something *is* wrong with us.

My message to you, that this book will unpack, is that *there's nothing wrong with you*. There are invisible, unrecognized traumas in our lives. Trauma adaptations that developed to protect us, form an invisible inner prison that holds us back from living a full and thriving life. This book sets out to help you see the invisible, so you can do



the impossible. It will shine the light on the invisible inner walls created by trauma and give you the tools to begin dismantling them.

Perhaps you picked up this book because you're feeling trapped. You're feeling frustrated, enraged, burned out, dismissed, helpless, ashamed, anxious, depressed, lonely, fatigued, or sick.

Or perhaps you picked up this book because of what you're *not* feeling. Perhaps, despite checking off all the right boxes of career and motherhood and marriage, you are not feeling creatively, sexually, and professionally fulfilled, happy, peaceful, and comfortable in your skin.

Welcome to the sisterhood of jailbreakers.

## Enter Patriarchy Stress Disorder

When I started allowing the possibility that perhaps I, too, had trauma, the dots began to connect. When my dad yelled at me when I was a little girl, I would freeze and cry. When the last boss I had yelled at me, I would freeze and cry. Because the trauma of emotional abuse felt so familiar, it felt like "home," I never considered quitting. My "prison guards" made sure of that: The familiar equals safe. The prison guards generated stories in my mind, such as, "This is your dream job. It's prestigious. Each time there's an opening for this position, there are hundreds of applicants. You'll never do better." If you were ever in an abusive relationship or know someone who was, understand that it's not the fault of the person being abused that they stay in them. Prison guards are the reason we stay. Trauma is the reason.

I also began to see some trauma symptoms and adaptations in women who didn't have trauma history in the conventional definition. These women came from very supportive families and did not recall any significant adverse experiences—emotional, physical, or sexual. As I was wondering about what these hidden traumas

could possibly be, I kept seeing new scientific findings on intergenerational transmission of trauma, revealing that traumatic experiences get recorded and passed down in our DNA. More dots connected.

*Women have been oppressed for millennia. Oppression is traumatic.* If trauma is genetically transmitted, it may explain why women without any trauma history they could recall displayed trauma symptoms and adaptations.

This realization was really big. Not only does the invisible prison of trauma form through our own experiences—but we're born with the history or trauma and its adaptations, developed to keep us safe, imprinted in our DNA as a part of our survival instructions.

For women living under patriarchy, these survival instructions include: be seen and not heard, don't be too sexy, too loud, too smart, too rich, too visible, too powerful. Powerful women are burned at the stake. Or, as my mother used to warn me, "No one would want to marry you."

Once I saw this universal, collective trauma that all women share, I could not unsee it. Suddenly everything made sense. It made sense why no matter how much we achieve and how much personal growth work we do, women are still tormented by the inner critic and don't consistently *feel* good about ourselves. It made sense that even very successful women feel this way. Meryl Streep spoke about her imposter syndrome in an interview with Ken Burns: "You think, 'Why would anyone want to see me again in a movie? And I don't know how to act anyway, so why am I doing this?'"<sup>2</sup>

This discovery felt very important. It felt like the missing piece to the puzzle of not only creating the "good life" that we want, but also being able to enjoy it. It felt like

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<sup>2</sup> Meryl Streep, interview by Ken Burns, *USA Weekend*, 2002.

the missing piece to stopping the war on ourselves, on our bodies. To getting off the hamster wheel of achievement and “self-improvement.” To finally feeling happy and fulfilled, and comfortable in our skin, regardless of the circumstances.

Unless we recognize and learn the tools that can help heal this universal trauma, women are stuck trying to “break through” what’s holding us back as if these were personal issues. They’re not. *There’s nothing wrong with you.* Seeing the bigger picture of this shared trauma calls for solutions that involve healing it.

To help people see the invisible, I termed this insidious trauma, *Patriarchy Stress Disorder*® (PSD). Since the dots connected for me, I’ve shared my discovery with thousands of women via my podcast, newsletter, and live and virtual interviews and talks I gave at conferences and organizations across the country and internationally. (You can find these on my website, [www.drvalerie.com](http://www.drvalerie.com).) The most common reaction was along these lines: “Thank God, somebody has put the words to what I’ve been feeling all my life, wondering what’s wrong with me!”

This book will help you see this invisible trauma, its symptoms and effects, and the steps for healing it—so you can do the impossible (or what has always been impossible for a woman under patriarchy): be truly, unapologetically happy, free, fulfilled, and successful on your own terms.

## What This Book is *Really* About

The discussion of the patriarchal culture and PSD is not a question of men versus women. Both the masculine and the feminine are severely traumatized in patriarchy’s oppressive system. The cost of membership in patriarchy is that we must fit into very narrow definitions of gender and the roles and expectations that come with it, and this oppresses the authentic expression of everyone.

People along the gender spectrum experience this differently. Experiences of oppression based on race, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic status, and

other characteristics form additional layers of trauma. This book is specific to women's experience, so that we may recognize how the trauma of patriarchal oppression affects us and heal our way to happiness and fulfillment. But it is my hope that it provides insights, tools, and strategies that benefit all humans. That it unites rather than divides. All humans have trauma, and this book is an invitation to uncover it and discover paths for healing it.

Women's happiness and fulfillment is the heartbeat of the book, but we can also look to a bigger view of the costs of the absence of trauma awareness from the cultural conversation and corporate world. This blind spot in advancing gender equality may have inadvertently contributed to skyrocketing burnout rates of high-achieving women and other painful unintended consequences on our health, relationships, and well-being. As a heartbreaking illustration of this point, the number of women CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies at the time of this writing is down 50 percent in just the past few months to less than 5 percent, with only *one* woman of color. Women's empowerment has gotten hijacked by the patriarchal overculture and became about giving a woman the "opportunity" to burn herself out by working harder and doing more while playing by the patriarchal rules. They used to burn us at the stake—now they just hand us the torches.

To end the epidemic of burnout and dissatisfaction among high-achieving women, we must see the invisible barriers to women's thriving in our work in the world, relationships, and health that are even more insidious than the external glass ceiling.

This book will make the invisible barriers visible by unpacking the trauma of oppression—how it's passed down between the generations, how it manifests and affects us, its costs to our lives, relationships, organizations, and society at large, and how it specifically affects women. I chose women as the largest historically oppressed group of people to which I also belong. My vision is that the information and the messages in this book serve every group of people who have been

oppressed based on race, class, ability status, gender identity, and sexual orientation—as well as the allies. For many people whose membership in several historically oppressed groups creates layers of trauma complexity, I hope the information found in this book serves as validation of their journeys and conveys the message—*there's nothing wrong with you*.

The healing methodology described in this book can be used by people across the gender continuum. However, in every person's experience there's a lot of individual complexity. Please note that this book is not meant to diagnose or treat any health or mental health condition. Here, I offer insights from my own experiences and those of my clients. I highly recommend as you embark on your own healing journey, that you work with a mental health professional trained in mind-body trauma resolution. I've included my suggestions to help you find such a professional on my website.

This book is not a replacement for medical or psychological care; if you are experiencing symptoms that interfere with your daily life, seek a practitioner to help, and this book may complement your work.

Nor is it a comprehensive deconstruction of the issues affecting women in society today. Since you're holding this book, you're already aware of these issues. It is my belief that social change goes hand-in-hand with personal healing. The latter is the focus of the book.

Outside experiences of oppression, every human has trauma—within a broad range of its variety, severity and complexity. My hope is that this book serves everyone who reads it. That it helps you see the invisible inner walls that trauma has created in your relationships with yourself, your partners, family, coworkers, and people at large. That it helps you see yourself and others with more empathy and compassion. That it inspires you to get on the jailbreak journey and support others in theirs. That it begins a jailbreak movement to heal our relationships, organizations, and our

culture—and create the world that supports everyone’s happiness and fulfillment, authentic expression, safety, and thriving.

## Scheming a Jailbreak

This book details the plan for jailbreak. We’ll begin with a tour of the prison of Patriarchy Stress Disorder—the ancestral, collective, and personal trauma of oppression—and you’ll begin to see its walls.

Next, we’ll meet what I call the “prison guards,” the trauma adaptations that operate in us to keep us safe. You’ll learn to recognize the guards, thank and befriend them, and evolve their job descriptions to become your “body guards”—so they can keep you safe not by keeping you locked up, but by protecting you on your journey to your deepest desires.

Then we’ll begin to dig the tunnel to freedom. I’ll show you how to safely work through the layers of individual, collective, and inherited trauma that are holding you back, and begin healing them and integrating the treasures that this excavation uncovers.

Once you’ve broken through to a life on the outside, there are no boxes to check off and no models to follow. You’ll be charting new territory all on your own and reclaiming your relationship with your authentic desires as your guides and pleasure as your fuel.

In the final chapters, we’ll take a look at how jailbreakers’ lives, relationships, and work in the world change post-jailbreak.

We were all born into the prison of ancestral and collective trauma, designed by the patriarchal ethos. The deepest trauma women experience under patriarchy is that our lives, our bodies and minds are not as valuable as men’s. That we’re worth *less*.

This core wound of worth-*less*-ness sets us up to check off the boxes of external achievement, only to have those achievements mask unhappiness and dis-ease—like putting up nice window treatments to cover the prison bars. You picked up this book because you’ve discovered that no matter how much success you create, you still feel like you are not enough. Now you know: It is not your fault or failure.

This book is for the woman who’s done decorating the prison cell.

I love what you’ve done with the place. It’s looking quite exquisite. You and I must have read the same prison cell decorating magazines. But now you’re ready to experience the real thing—the vibrant colors, sensual textures, and titillating fragrance of your life on the outside. I’m thrilled you’re joining me in jailbreak!

## The Missing Link

You have glimpsed the invisible prison walls somewhere in your life—in looking in the mirror and getting a sinking feeling at the sight of wrinkles and wondering if you should get a new “anti-aging” cream, Botox, or plastic surgery to keep time at bay. Or in tolerating the way your work environment does not see, care about, let alone encourage the full expression of your talents. Or in telling yourself that although you’re not fully happy in your relationship, at least you have a partner. You diligently went to therapy, read self-help books, and attended personal development workshops and retreats—only to find yourself stuck on the hamster wheel of “self-improvement” turn after turn.

I saw this cycle in my clients long before I saw it in myself. Before the left side of my body pulled the emergency break, I was stuck in my own hamster wheel—trying to outrun the pain of worth-*less*-ness by taking one personal development workshop after another, reading heaps of self-help books, while feverishly decorating my prison cell with more degrees, home remodeling, and diamonds for my wedding ring.

My left side was telling me the truth: I didn't feel *fully* alive. I was not living a whole life.

Soon after this realization, I felt intense grief. *What the hell happened to me? Who the hell was I before I got sucked into this hamster wheel? I can't remember.* I yearned to reclaim who I once was, to understand where I had lost myself and when I had become a dead woman walking.

I asked myself, what would bring me more pleasure and ease? If I could have everything my way, what would my life look like? My inner voice answered modestly at first. *I would take a lunch break. I would go pee when I want to pee, instead of holding it until I was done with my back-to-back clients. I would go outside. I would move my body every day.*

Then my inner voice got greedier: *I would shorten my 14-hour workdays. I would have more time off.* Each baby step led to a bigger step, my inner guidance leading me to make life-changing moves: *I would close my private practice and have location independence. I would expand the reach of my work from the therapy office to the world. I would share my message with millions of women. I would speak on stages, write a book, and work with conscious individuals and companies to create cultural shifts that would support people's success and thriving in every area of their lives.*

And so I listened and followed. The journey has taken me way beyond the invisible inner walls that enclosed the narrow perimeter of what I believed was possible for me. Not only in the outer circumstances, but in the way I feel inside. I wake up happy. Whack-a-mole addictions I used to numb the pain with—work, food, alcohol, stress, anger, and more—no longer shield me from being present in my life. I took up residence inside my body—a place that I rarely visited before, hanging out mostly in my head. I'm able to feel pleasure and joy so much deeper and navigate challenges with a lot more resilience.



My new life was born out of my deep authentic desires. Getting in touch with them took getting through the layers of prison guards. PSD makes sure they're well protected—there's nothing more dangerous to the patriarchal status quo than a woman who's in touch with her desires.

My mind resisted each one of them, screaming, *You cannot have that, because that doesn't exist!* The voice of my desire replied, *Okay, maybe you're right. I'm just not going to settle for anything less.*

I relentlessly followed my joy. Over time, I have become a Rottweiler with my joy.

Throughout this book, I'll show you how to hold on to your joy, as though your life depends on it—because it does. Joy keeps you in touch with yourself and your desires. It's the True North of your life's journey. Joy is an essential elixir for your sex life and a potent “anti-aging” agent. Your health and well-being depend on it. So does your professional success and harmony in your relationships.

When I let my authentic desire drive, opportunities and relationships came into my life that were so much better than what my limited imagination could have ever conjured. In my work now, I get to share the teachings and techniques that have been responsible for my and my clients' transformation with people who are looking to break free from their own prisons. The desire that drives me now is that every woman knows her true beauty and her true power. And that she never trades them for the fake surrogate that patriarchy tries to sell to her at a very high price—of forgetting what a powerful and beautiful being she is.

This book was born of this desire.

## Chapter One

# Waking up in Prison

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.*

—Marianne Williamson

Leslie was a recognized expert in her field. She had a vision to pour her talents and experience into building her own business, so Leslie joined a mastermind. She invested tens of thousands of dollars to be in that room, knowing it would support her vision. After her presentation, another member approached her with an opportunity that fit her skillset and the direction she wanted to grow her business. He needed consultation around a new product line, and he wanted to pay Leslie for her guidance—to the tune of \$350,000.

Weeks later, Leslie told me this part of the story, and then quickly moved on to another topic. I stopped her and asked, “What happened with the offer?”

“What offer?”

“The consulting package that was offered to you.”

Leslie was silent. She was processing. Eventually she asked again. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the entrepreneur who asked you to consult for him for \$350,000. What did you do?”

She paused and took a deep breath. “I thanked him. And then I forgot about it.” Leslie said. “I didn’t follow up with him. I didn’t do anything.”

I realized that she had not considered the offer as a real possibility, so quickly had she dismissed that her skills and expertise could be so valuable to another person.

This is how trauma adaptations operate. Leslie’s response to an offer that felt beyond her reach was to run away from it. In fact, she ran away while she was still in the room, still talking to that entrepreneur—she just checked out in her mind and disengaged completely, and later she forgot about it.

When trauma is triggered, it hijacks us out of the prefrontal cortex of the brain—our executive decision-making center, the seat of logic and reason—and drops us straight into the ancient hindbrain—focused on our survival—where words and notions don’t exist. Certainly six-figure offers don’t exist there. Leslie was so triggered that her prefrontal cortex barely registered the offer.

When triggered, a trauma response of fight, flight, or freeze gets activated to keep us safe. Leslie went into flight.

It would be a great ending to this story to say that Leslie went back to the entrepreneur and took the offer. After our conversation, she did indeed reconnect with him, and his offer was still on the table. Ultimately, she declined it. The offer to be paid handsomely for her talents was an acknowledgment of her worth—which caused painful dissonance with her wound of worth-*less*-ness, so her mind created lots of “rational” stories to get her to move away from the discomfort. *He doesn’t know me that well*, she thought. *He will be disappointed in me*. The work wasn’t *exactly* in her area of expertise, she decided. Each of these stories was the bar of a jail cell to keep her safe. Familiar equals safe. Even if the familiar is a prison.

I can't help but wonder, had Leslie learned the jailbreak tools, if this story would have a different ending. We'll never know. But what we do know is that most people would do what Leslie did. They would choose the prison over jailbreak, the safety of the status quo over the risk of new experiences, even if very desirable. And they will justify this decision and believe their justification.

Consciously, Leslie thought of herself and showed up as a confident woman, aware and proud of her talents and accomplishments. But her subconscious imprinted a different story—the story of ancestral oppression based on gender, race, and social class, where a woman's power was a punishable offense.

No matter what we think, how much “mindset” work we do—the subconscious always wins. PSD wires it to sabotage our success and thriving to ensure our survival. Because survival is prioritized over success and thriving any day of the week.

As we'll see, this inner prison comes in many forms. Each with a very rational story that makes logical sense. There's a whole world outside that makes no sense at all, because it does not confirm the worth-*less*-ness wound of PSD—so the prison protects us from it.

## The Prison Foundations

The prison of PSD is built over a pit that is the original trauma inflicted upon women by patriarchy—the wound of worth-*less*-ness. The millennia of patriarchy have impressed upon us, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that women's bodies and minds are worth less than men's. The pain of this core wound is what we're trying to escape. We climb higher, and we build sophisticated scaffolding out of our careers, businesses, relationships, marriages, and families. We build up continuous achievements and milestones in our lives, but as we climb ever higher, we still don't gain freedom.

Then the scaffolding collapses.

We find ourselves in crisis: We have a huge blowout at work, or we find ourselves on the brink of divorce, or we wind up in the hospital. We tumble into the pit we worked so hard to avoid.

Most of my clients came to work with me after a part of their scaffolding collapsed. If we have the awareness, the support, the guidance, and the right tools—this is the perfect opportunity to dig the tunnel out of the prison. When we're on the prison floor, or have fallen through into the pit, we're so much closer to recognizing and healing the wound of worth-*less*-ness and reclaiming the treasures that make up our authenticity and wholeness that our traumas had shattered.

I classify these traumas as ancestral, collective, and individual. As we define those terms, you'll see that some of this trauma comes from personal events and experiences in your life that made you feel unsafe in your fullest authentic expression, while others were passed down to you from previous generations as survival instructions for a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Each trauma creates trauma adaptations—I refer to them as *prison guards*. Their job is to keep us safe. They accomplish it by keeping our bodies and minds in vigilant survival mode, despite our best efforts to thrive. Jailbreak is possible when we start to notice how these adaptations show up in our lives, when we understand the need for safety they are serving, and we create the experience of safety necessary for the prison guards to allow—and actually support—our safe passage to freedom.

Before we can dig, we must take a look around at exactly where we are. In the first step of your jailbreak, I invite you to explore what your own prison is made of.

## Ancestral Trauma

The invisible inner prison was not built in your lifetime. You were born into it. The first layer of trauma that created it is likely to have been passed down to you in the DNA.

The new science of epigenetics has shown us that gene expression can and does change in response to environmental changes and experiences, and that these changes are inheritable. Increasingly, studies are showing that trauma adaptations can be genetically transmitted across generations as a part of our survival instructions.

A review of studies on combat soldiers with PTSD showed that their traumatic experiences had resulted in epigenetic changes that could be inherited by their offspring.<sup>3</sup> Another study of women who were pregnant during the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda found that their children had inherited trauma-induced epigenetic changes.<sup>4</sup> Other studies found that the children of Holocaust survivors had inherited traits associated with the stress response of their parents.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nagy A. Youssef, Laura Lockwood, Shaoyong Su, Guang Hao, Bart P.F. Rutten, "The Effects of Trauma, with or without PTSD, on the Transgenerational DNA Methylation Alterations in Human Offsprings," *Brain Sciences*, 2018, 8(5): 83.

<sup>4</sup> N. Perroud, E. Rutembesa, A. Paoloni-Giacobino, J. Mutabaruka, L. Mutesa, L. Stenz, A. Malafosse, and F. Karege, "The Tutsi Genocide and Transgenerational Transmission of Maternal Stress," *Biological Psychiatry*, May 2014, 15(4):334-45.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Yehuda, Nikolaos P. Daskalakis, Linda M. Bierer, Heather N. Bader, Torsten Klengel, Florian Holsboer, and Elisabeth B. Binder, "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on *FKBP5* Methylation," *Biological Psychiatry*, September 1, 2016, 80(5):372-380.

An even more fascinating experiment on mice found that subsequent generations could be made to inherit trauma not in response to genocide or war, but to mild electric shocks paired with the smell of cherry blossoms.<sup>6</sup>

Researchers piped the smell of cherry blossoms into the cages of mice, and simultaneously, they zapped the mice's feet with mild electric shocks. This conditioned the mice to have a stress response to the smell. They were then bred, and the offspring were raised without being exposed to the smell of cherry blossoms.

A look into the mice's heads showed that the offspring had more neurons devoted to detecting cherry blossom smell in their brains and noses. When they were exposed to the smell, the offspring became anxious and fearful. The mice were bred again, and the smell of cherry blossoms elicited the same fear and anxiety reaction in the grandchildren of the traumatized mice. Neuroscientists discovered that epigenetic markers transmitted a traumatic experience across generations, shaping their behavior according to the trauma adaptations.

PSD is women fearing the smell of cherry blossoms. Being unapologetically visible, authentically expressing our brilliance and sexuality, being in touch with our desires and going after them—showing up in our power is the smell of cherry blossoms that we were taught to fear through the trauma of oppression that has spanned countless generations.

A woman's power has always been a punishable offense. Under patriarchy, it's never been safe for a woman to be visible. For the crime of being visible in their power, women used to be burned at the stake, drowned, and beheaded. We may not have directly been persecuted for our power, but we came from the generations of

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<sup>6</sup> Meeri Kim, "Study Finds that Fear can Travel Quickly through Generations of Mice DNA," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2013.

women before us who have been traumatically conditioned not to reach for the cherry blossoms—because they were either dangerous or unattainable.

Patriarchal oppression of women through legislature and social norms that control women's bodies, voices, and money isn't all ancient history. In the US, until the Women's Business Ownership Act of 1988, a woman could not take out a business loan without a signature of a male relative. Women's rights—around voting, educational and employment opportunities, birth control, abortion, divorce, protection from marital rape and from sexual harassment in the workplace—have only been established within the last 100 years, most much more recently than that.

Most shifts toward gender parity have taken place within two or three most recent generations. If humans are at least as connected with their parents and grandparents as mice, we can appreciate the stress that the smell of cherry blossoms—of opportunities—creates for women. In addition to the epigenetic mechanisms of trauma transmission we've seen in mice, humans have storytelling, familial and cultural programming. And unlike our traumatized mice friends, generation after generation, women continue to get re-traumatized. Women's rights are still facing strong headwinds from the patriarchal status quo today.

This trauma doesn't just dissolve as external conditions change. For the mice who never experienced the electric shocks, the smell of cherry blossoms still caused distress. The survival instructions in our DNA dictate what we must—and must not do—to protect ourselves. Each instruction, based on another layer of trauma, narrows our subconscious sense of what is possible. It makes our invisible inner prison cell smaller.

Ancestral trauma does not spring from the events in our own lives, and yet we carry it with us and pass it along to the next generations—until we heal it. This trauma does not “belong to us” individually, but it shapes how each one of us shows up in



the world today. When we heal it, we end the cycle of trauma transmission, liberating not only ourselves, but the future generations.

Based on ancestral trauma, our subconscious has been programmed to protect us from being too successful, powerful, wealthy, or happy. Our subconscious has imprinted survival instructions along these lines. We must be seen and not heard. We must be attractive—enough to be accepted, but not too attractive—lest we won't be taken seriously. We mustn't go for that promotion, or we won't be liked. We mustn't be too smart, or no man will want to date or marry us. We mustn't be too sexy, or we'll be raped. We mustn't shine too brightly and draw attention, or we'll be in danger of persecution.

Now, consciously, you probably don't believe any of these patriarchal precepts. But it's your subconscious that calls the shots. Neuroscientists have found that almost all our decisions are made in the subconscious—with the conscious mind merely stepping in to rationalize them (more fascinating studies are coming out all the time; we keep collecting them for your reference at [www.drvalerie.com](http://www.drvalerie.com)). Our subconscious is rooted in survival. And it operates according to the survival instructions. Survival takes precedence over thriving any day of the week. Subconscious always wins.

This is a very brief summary of science that debunks the harmful self-help postulate that sells a lot of “self-improvement” hamster wheels—that you're “holding yourself back.” *You're not.* Generation after generation, you were taught to fear the smell of cherry blossoms. Once we understand how these messages and instructions are created, transmitted, and how they affect us, we can learn to create the healing conditions to resolve intergenerational trauma. As we resolve trauma, we can have our subconscious support our dreams—not sabotage them, in order to keep us safe. We can map out our jailbreak.

## Collective Trauma

The first hold of trauma comes from the disempowerment and persecution of our ancestors, but the second method by which trauma keeps a hold on us is through collective experiences of women today.

Around the globe, women are subjected to genital mutilation, child marriage, sexual violence, barriers to education, and severe economic disempowerment. In Saudi Arabia, a major US economic partner, women got to vote for the first time in 2015 and got to drive in 2018. Each time we turn on the television or tune into social media, we are made aware of the collective state of women in the world. These stories trigger the original wound of PSD—the wound of being worth *less*.

Although in the US women enjoy a lot more rights and freedoms, our worth-*lessness* is communicated to us through financial and political inequities, as well as social norms. In the workplace, the wage gap persists. According to a 2019 National Partnership for Women and Families report on the gender and ethnicity wage gap, Latinas are paid 53 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men. Native American women are paid 58 cents on the dollar, Black women 61 cents, White, non-Hispanic women 77 cents, and Asian women 85 cents.<sup>7</sup> In the entrepreneurial arena, women also face economic disadvantages. According to an article in *Fortune*, in 2018 women founders received only 2.2% of venture capital dollars.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of this writing, the US laws continue to control the female body by regulating abortion access, whereas there aren't any laws that allow the government to regulate the male body. These laws are created primarily by men. Representation of women, particularly women of color, although on the rise, is still far from parity.

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<sup>7</sup> "Quantifying America's Gender Wage Gap by Race/Ethnicity," *National Partnership for Women and Families*, April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Hinchliffe, "Funding for Female Founders Stalled at 2.2% of VC Dollars in 2018," *Fortune*, January 28, 2019.

The war on women waged by the patriarchal culture expresses in social norms that ranks women's conditional worth on the basis of such characteristics as skin color, age, weight, body shape, and "feminine" traits.

As a result, PSD expresses not only in the constant stress from the external factors that police our authentic expression, dictate our worth, and limit our access to political and financial power. An even more insidious expression is the war on women that it is internalized—in the ways in which the "prison guards" in the invisible inner prison of trauma police our own authentic expression, dictate our worth, and limit our opportunities.

PSD created a blueprint of worth-*less*-ness in our subconscious, which makes it challenging to engage in experiences that affirm our worth—be it in relationships or business arenas.

Leslie's story is a typical example of how this plays out: We automatically dismiss anything that is not consistent with our subconscious sense of our worth. Just think of yourself receiving compliments. Do you dodge them? Hastily return them? Or do you actually *receive* them as an accurate, appropriate, and welcome reflection of your beauty and power?

The challenge with receiving limits the reach and impact of a woman's work in the world, the growth of her bank accounts, and the intimacy and pleasure in her partnerships. Women commonly self-sabotage good things that carry with them a reflection of their worth—because it's *dissonant* with the trauma of worth-*less*-ness. In Leslie's case—and in so many others—trying to imagine that her expertise could be compensated at such a high level created cognitive dissonance in her mind. So she ran.

Warren Buffett spoke to this cultural conditioning in the documentary *Becoming Warren Buffett*. "My sisters are fully as smart as I am," he said, "they got better

personalities than I have, but they got the message that their future was limited and I got the message that the sky is the limit. It was the culture."<sup>9</sup>

The unconscious privilege of men under patriarchy is being believed in. They are born into the culture where they see 95 percent of Fortune 500 companies are run by men, the country where 100 percent of presidents at the time of this writing have been male. No matter what pretty words about women's empowerment are placed in commencement speeches and social media memes, as long as women don't see themselves represented in places of power, the message we receive and imprint is: You're worth *less*.

A particular study<sup>10</sup> illustrates how early these messages affect us. In the study, groups of five-, six- and seven-year-olds were read stories wherein the main character was described as "really, really smart."

"This person figures out how to do things quickly," the reader said, "and comes up with answers much faster and better than anyone else. This person is really, really smart." The stories didn't reveal the gender of the main character.

At age five, both boys and girls were likely to associate the gender of the main character with their own gender. But by age six or seven, just as these children were beginning to get socialized in school, the girls overwhelmingly identified the gender of the main character as male. The societal stereotype that views brilliance as a male trait has already been imprinted on them.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter W. Kunhardt, dir, *Becoming Warren Buffett*, 2017; Pleasantville, NY: Kunhardt Films.

<sup>10</sup> Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie, and Andrei Cimpian, "Gender Stereotypes about Intellectual Ability Emerge Early and Influence Children's Interests," *Science*, January 27, 2017, 355(6323): 389-391.

This research is not from the 1950s—this study was published in 2017.

Another study uncovered that when a woman experienced an objectifying gaze from a man for a few seconds before taking a math test, her performance was negatively affected. The study found no negative effects on a man's performance following experiencing an objectifying gaze from a female.<sup>11</sup>

Given the wide-spread nature of this experience for women—the ongoing cultural trauma of objectification—I believe this study gives us but a glimpse into its far-ranging consequences for women's professional performance, mental health, and wellness.

The cultural trauma of conscious and unconscious gender bias across professional fields is another uphill battle that takes a toll on women's productivity, creativity, and well-being day in and day out. An engineer described a time when she submitted a presentation to her boss. The only feedback he had did not have to do with the content. "You'll need to change the colors on the deck," he said. "*Pink* is not an engineering color."

This communication expressed his unconscious gender bias: *Women can't be engineers—don't remind us that you're a woman.*

Over time, women develop layers of trauma adaptations to protect ourselves against cultural trauma. They help us tolerate hostile environments. Because we've learned that tolerating hostile environments is necessary for success under patriarchy. Common adaptations among successful women include chronic high stress levels, workaholism, and unconsciously shaping our ways of thinking, acting, and being to be more like men. Predictably, these go hand-in-hand with issues with sleep and

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah J. Gervais, Theresa K. Vescio, and Jill Allen, "When What You See Is What You Get," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, January 25, 2011, 35(1): 5-17.

weight, adrenals and thyroid, female organs such as breasts and the reproductive system, anxiety, depression, and addictions. Parenting problems, strained relationships with children and partners, dead or unsatisfying sex lives, prescription meds to mask the symptoms and their side effects are so disturbingly common—they are an expected “price of success” among high-achieving women.

The staggering cost of the trauma adaptations associated with PSD is the deadening effect they have on our lives: the disconnection they create from our true authentic essence, making us forget, leave behind parts of who we truly are. Because these parts don't fit in the patriarchal prison, they end up being edited out from our authentic wholeness—just like the color pink from the engineering deck.

## Individual Trauma

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as an emotional response “to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster.”<sup>12</sup> It also recognizes adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as traumatic. These include physical, sexual and emotional abuse; physical and emotional neglect; exposure to adult incarceration, mental illness, substance abuse or violence in the household; parental separation or divorce; poverty, bullying, exposure to community violence and discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

The definition I offered earlier captures an even broader experience: Trauma is *any event or circumstance that made you feel unsafe in your fullest authentic expression and resulted in creating trauma adaptations.*

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<sup>12</sup> “Trauma,” *American Psychological Association*, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Sharon G. Portwood, “Adverse Childhood Experiences,” *American Psychological Association*, November 2018.

None of us escapes the experience of being shut down by others, ignored, yelled at, or criticized. Growing up in a home where a parent is depressed or has their own stressors can create an environment in which we feel unsafe in our fullest authentic expression. The trauma adaptations may look like withdrawing and making ourselves smaller to protect ourselves from experiencing the pain of rejection or criticism, or feeling unwanted.

Many of my clients, when they first come to me, believe they have not experienced trauma. They explain that they had great childhoods, full of great memories. When we begin our work and begin digging together, we discover experiences that made them feel shut down, ignored, or unsafe in some way.

Each of these experiences is a knot in a web that holds them back.

Even experiences that we consider insignificant or normal can define our thoughts, behaviors, and choices. These are mild electric shocks we received while reaching for cherry blossoms. We do not easily think of these experiences as trauma because they are commonplace and seemingly benign. That's just life. But life, as it turns out, includes great deals of trauma, and when we become aware of these experiences, each one presents an opportunity to heal.

Sometimes my clients come to me aware of the traumatic experiences they've had, but they believe that they're "over it," they've "dealt with it," they've "worked through it"—because they talked about it in therapy before. But talking about a traumatic experience does not resolve trauma. These experiences are lodged in our bodies. They are imprinted in the nervous system reactions that got wired to that event or experience.

The body remembers feeling unsafe. And it reminds us each time this trauma gets triggered. The mind may create stories, explanations, and rationalizations. But the body never lies.

In our jailbreak, we'll engage the body's wisdom, memory, and intelligence to guide us to freedom through trauma healing.

## The Prison Security System

Just as post-traumatic stress disorder develops in the wake of a trauma, PTSD comprises layers of ancestral trauma, in combination with the collective feminine trauma and the individual trauma we experience in a world where it's never been safe to be a woman.

It's important to know that what hurts us in the present moment is not the trauma itself; it's our trauma adaptations—the defenses we developed in response to our inherited, collective, and individual traumatic experiences. Some of these adaptations are our daily companions, e.g., high stress levels that are keeping the nervous system in a state of constant hypervigilance—ready to fight or flight to keep us safe. Others get activated when trauma is triggered—such as, when an upcoming public speaking opportunity resonates with the ancestral, collective, or personal wounds around visibility and speaking one's mind. These adaptations may include procrastination, anxiety, and various forms of self-sabotage meant to protect us from danger.

I call these defenses our “prison guards.” While their job is to keep us safe, they do so by locking us in survival, at the expense of our thriving. The guards tell us that it is safer on the inside, within the confines of our history of oppression.

Our *minds, bodies, and actions* cooperate to maintain this safety.

Our minds create whatever stories will keep us from breaking out of jail. These are our self-defeating stories, our stories about self-doubt, confidence and self-esteem (or lack thereof), and imposter syndrome. “Who do you think you are?” “You’re a fraud.” “This will never work.” Our mind tells us these stories to keep us from



reaching our goals, dreams and desires—because doing so would get us out of the safety of the certainty of the PSD prison and into the dangerous world outside.

Another layer of the prison security system lies in the action domain. The prison guards here manifest as distractions, procrastination, being frozen in inaction, or engaging in various kinds of self-sabotage. Addictive behaviors fall into this category too—overeating, overworking, overdrinking, overshopping, overexercising, or drowning in streaming shows. These actions also keep us safely imprisoned.

Mindset work will not help us jailbreak. Many personal growth seminars, empowerment programs, and self-help books urge us to think positively, say affirmations, and jump into action. These popular approaches advocate that we push through our defenses. If we can just change our mindset, they tell us, we can do anything.

But these approaches ignore one very important fact. Our defenses are there for a reason. That reason being self-preservation, survival, and safety.

If the defenses on the level of the mind or action fail, survival needs to be ensured by other means. Our defense system is very sophisticated.

We may change the way we think, but the prison guards will sound the alarm. *There's been a security breach! We need reinforcements!* More prison guards will come rushing in.

The more defenses we push through, the more costly it is to our nervous system. The prison guards show up on the level of the body as health expressions, anxiety, depression, adrenal fatigue, trouble sleeping, and stress addiction—inability to slow down or stop and relax. The stories that we believe we're combatting within the mind alone become somaticized: They manifest in a wide array of stress responses in the body.

For high-achieving women, it's usually our health that breaks. We push through the defenses on the level of the mind and action—*self-doubt, self-schmout, I'm just going to do it, okay?* Many coaching and “personal growth” approaches advocate treating fear as the enemy and pushing through it to break through. Many high-achieving women follow these misguided strategies and push through—until their adrenals blow out—and break through—until their health falls apart. A host of symptoms floods in, ranging from fatigue to hormone imbalances to autoimmune issues.

Stress-related conditions and trauma are directly connected. Stress is a trauma adaptation for the nervous system, keeping us in a state of hypervigilance and hyperactivation to make sure we're always aware of unsafe conditions that surround us. What's more, we often don't even feel we're stressed: because we were born in the prison, we've inherited this trauma adaptation. High stress feels normal until our health begins to crack.

We have to put out the torches they've handed us! In the subsequent chapters I'll show you, step-by-step, how to do it safely and effectively—without sacrificing, but in fact getting back more of your time and productivity.

## How Our Bodies React to Unsafe Experiences

Our bodies react to threats with a fight, flight, or freeze response. When we experience trauma, whether on an individual or collective level, our system files the experience under “threats.” When an aspect of another situation has the flavor of that threat (something in it looks, sounds, smells, tastes, feels similar)—our survival instincts are triggered, our nervous system activates, and we are sent once again into fight, flight or freeze.

We are not always consciously aware of what feels threatening to our system. Walking down the street or taking a taxi can put us on guard. We look over our

shoulders. We brace ourselves as we turn on the TV, where the news ranges from kidnappings, rapes, and murders of women, to debates about women's rights, to beauty propaganda that polices women's bodies.

Feeling unsafe inside our own bodies or in the outside world is a woman's baseline. As a result, our nervous systems stay in a high level of activation—which translates into chronic stress and can lead to chronic illness.

## Tracking Our Reactions

The mind explains what the body experiences. Our thoughts don't come first; our body sensations do. The mind plays catch-up and makes sense and meaning out of what we felt.

Imagine that a ball has been thrown at you. You don't see it coming, but you instinctively turn to it and catch it. Your action comes first, and then your mind explains what just happened. "This is a ball. It came from over there. Somebody must be playing catch." Your body reacts first, and your mind explains later.

When your body is in fight, your mind constructs a story that justifies and fans the fire of that state. Since this state was originally triggered for self-preservation, your mind takes the ball and runs with it. One of the best ways your mind can support this state is to tell you a story that agitates you. For example, in an argument with your husband, your mind might say: *It's his fault. He's always putting himself first. He never listens to me. He's probably having an affair.* In fight mode, your mind eggs you on. It instigates.

The stories our minds tell in flight are stories of disengagement. For example, when dealing with your finances—an uncomfortable area for many women—you might not even look at your bank account. Overwhelmed by all the money coming in and coming out, your mind might generate stories like: *I'm going to do it later. I'm not good at spreadsheets.*

When your body experiences freeze, the mind explains the experience with a story that supports freeze. It will tell you: *Don't do this—you're going to fail anyway. It makes no sense.*

Let's take a look at two all-too-common conditions that arise from chronic nervous system activation.

## Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety is like a rattling lid on the boiling pot of your authentic desires. The lid has been put there and secured by PSD, and it's been there so long you don't even know what's inside the pot. Sometimes you catch a delicious whiff from underneath the lid. Which, just like the smell of cherry blossoms, feels dangerous. And the lid gets secured tighter.

The lid's rattling—that's what you're aware of as *the problem*. It agitates you. You just want it to stop. Rather than lifting the lid to look inside, you focus on getting rid of the annoying sound. This is anxiety.

Anxiety is connected to the fight and flight reactions of the nervous system, and it is a state of hypervigilance. It's meant to protect us by constantly anticipating danger. These reactions urge us to action: We have the impulse to fight or flee bubbling up, but the lid stifles our response.

Depression is connected to the freeze reaction. This chronic freeze state is a trauma adaptation that our bodies engage to deal with the high levels of chronic activation. It numbs us out from our pain.

Depression is also a state of apathy. It starts as a trauma defense to protect us from the perceived impossibilities of our desires and our dreams. Depression starts with an activating event—something that leaves us heartbroken, disappointed, or in grief—and then it takes on a life of its own. We get stuck in sadness, and apathy sets

in to unplug us from the pain. In depression we can't bring ourselves to act, and therefore it keeps us safe from being hurt again.

Though we may very much want to get out of the painful state of depression, part of us feels comforted by the paralysis.

While depressed, we have difficulty summoning energy. Our body feels heavy and lethargic. Our thoughts reinforce this state. *What's the use of getting out of bed? Why bother?*

This is what trauma does. It unplugs us from our life force. It turns our emotions and our desires into unsafe places to go.

These two expressions, anxiety and depression, stem from the activity of our prison guards that are keeping us "safely" imprisoned—with agitation in anxiety and apathy in depression.

Both conditions signal our disconnection from our true desires. This is a big outcome of the trauma of PTSD: It dictates what is safe and what is not, and it creates an environment in which we don't let ourselves truly go there—to the heart of our own desires.

## Journaling

### What Are You Tolerating?

It can be difficult to see all the ways the different forms of trauma operate in our lives because often those patterns are so ingrained. One of our biggest clues is in the parts of our lives that we're tolerating. What circumstances in your life pinch just a little? What are you putting up with, and why? Take a few minutes to reflect. In your answers you'll begin to see the outline of the prison walls.

## What Is Your Deepest Desire?

The prison guards know: There is really nothing more dangerous to patriarchy than a woman who is in touch with her desires. As a consequence, the prison guards protect you from connecting with your deepest desire. Within the supplemental materials at [www.drvalerie.com](http://www.drvalerie.com), you can find a guided meditation on connecting with your desire.

As you listen to the meditation, notice what gets in the way of that connection. Those are your prison guards: Say hello to them and recognize that they are there to keep you safe. We'll work with them throughout this book.

After the meditation, journal about any breadcrumbs you have discovered to lead you to your desire. Don't censor yourself, and don't edit anything out. Nothing is silly or outrageous. Journal about any prison guards that jumped in to block you from knowing your true desire, for example, through stories or distractions.

You may discover when you try to connect with your desire that nothing comes up—and this too is a win. It provides helpful information about your prison guards: It may mean that your desire feels so big and so dangerous that it is very well-protected. As you go through this book, we'll learn to work with the prison guards, and I encourage you to return to this meditation on an ongoing basis. Notice how your experience changes. Each prison guard you notice protecting your desire, and each breadcrumb you find leading you closer to your desire, is a big win.

## Touching Joy, Touching Pain

In the 15 years that I worked as a psychotherapist, I've noticed that underlying every condition—from depression to anxiety, to problems with addiction, relationships and self-esteem—there was some kind of trauma.

In the long run, it is not the *trauma* that hurts us, but the defenses, the adaptations, the complex mechanisms we develop that protect us from touching it again. These same mechanisms protect us from feeling joy, ecstasy, happiness, fulfillment, and pleasure. Because our capacity to feel pleasure, joy and fulfillment equals our capacity to feel grief, loss, and sadness.

As we saw before, these protective mechanisms ensure our safety, and we cannot simply override them. If we try to override them, something else will backfire in the system. Real change does not happen when these defenders are activated. The only way to create lasting change is to establish safety and allow the prison guards to step down from their duties.

We can help the prison guards evolve into bodyguards by using tools grounded in psychology, biology, and neuroscience to create embodied safety. When we're able to do that, the guards' job description changes: instead of keeping us safe by keeping us locked up, they now protect us on the journey of growth and change, making it possible for us to create and experience what we desire in our lives—and feel safe along the way.

The jailbreak system came out of my own healing journey, where I was fortunate to study with many pioneers of mind-body approaches to mental health, healing, and trauma resolution.

## The Power of Embodiment

By the time I made it into the Master's program at Columbia University, I had suffered two episodes of major depression. Statistically speaking, I had an 80 percent likelihood of relapse within five years. I was afraid that my depression would be a life sentence.

I was in a program for psychological counseling, and struggling with incapacitating anxiety and panic attacks. Each time I would raise my hand in class, I broke into

sweat, my heart raced, my thoughts would leave my mind and I would leave my body.

Of course, I was in therapy. It helped me gain insight, but it didn't help alleviate my symptoms in any way. Which made matters worse. Yes, it was nice to share my problems with a therapist for 45 minutes once a week. But the fact that here I was, training to become a therapist, seeing a therapist week after week and not getting any better, made me feel like a complete failure.

Working out made me feel marginally better. At the time, the scaffolding I was focused on building within my PSD jail cell was all about how I looked and how much I weighed. I gave myself some conditional approval based on how well I could maintain my weight under the 122-pound cut-off line. One day, I was on the elliptical, observing through the glass wall of the exercise studio in front of me a yoga class. I'd never taken one and I was intrigued. All those size-zero girls doing all these crazy bendy things, looking so sexy. I wanted to do that. I wanted to be that. So I went to my first yoga class.

And after a few minutes, I rushed out, panicked.

It turned out, I was not able to hold a pose for five breaths. The poses weren't difficult. Physically, I could do them—but my mind was racing. Each pose was an invitation to be in my body, but trying to be in my body, following my breath, created panic. It did not feel safe. I had to get out of there.

But I went back. The sexy bendy size-zero girls that I wanted to be, or the challenge, or my intuition got me back on the mat. I got through more of the class before walking out.

I repeated that again. And again. Until one day, I got through the entire class and landed in the final relaxation pose, *savasana*. I felt so deeply relaxed like I've never



felt before. It was an entirely new experience—feeling safe and secure in my body. I wanted more of that. So much so that soon after, I completed a yoga teacher training program.

With a regular practice of yoga, to which I later added specific embodied trauma resolution tools, my anxiety resolved, and I haven't had a depression relapse in 20 years—without therapy or medication.

Coming back into my body, making my body my friend and a safe place to be, took time. But even the realization that I had not lived in my body in years was a pivotal moment on my healing journey.

What does embodiment feel like?

Remember your best vacation? Perhaps you went to the beach, and you felt the sand between your toes. You could smell the details of the ocean: the salt and seaweed and slippery fish. You heard the waves, one rolling after another, the fidelity of their crashing. Through your senses, you were uniquely connected to everything around you. You felt everything in you.

Imagine feeling this level of sensation and connection throughout your day, long after you've left the beach and returned home. That is embodiment: awareness of your sensory environment and the inner movements of your emotions.

At the start of my journey into embodiment, I realized that I hadn't felt that way in years. There was something dead about me, something robotic, that kept me from fully showing up. Trauma makes it feel unsafe to be in the body, and the head is a great place to hide.

When did I last feel fully alive? I was nineteen. I was a free spirit in how I dressed and expressed myself. I felt unencumbered, unconcerned with conforming. A sense of adventure and openness to the world were driving me to take opportunities. I

was creative, I wrote a lot of poetry. My authentic self took up a whole lot of the space inside me.

*Why nineteen? I thought. Why is that the last time I remember feeling alive?*

At nineteen, I had my first sexual trauma. I had sex when I didn't want to. He used manipulation, coercion. It was effective. To go through with it, I had to turn off parts of myself. I had to disembodify. I had to leave the unsafe place that my body has become and take refuge in my head. It was like taking a bite of the poisoned apple and falling asleep.

I talked about this experience with multiple therapists, while remaining disembodied, firmly planted in my head. In all fairness, disembodiment is a norm in our society. And for disembodied therapists who haven't done their own trauma healing work it's not something they would recognize or would know what to do with.

That yoga class began a long journey of studying with the pioneers of mind-body trauma healing, relearning to live embodied, to feel safe, vital, and happy, anxiety- and depression-free in my body, enjoy deep intimate relationships, and pour my energy and talents into rewarding work in the world. In this book, I want to share with you what I've discovered on my journey about the nature of the trauma imprisonment and how to free yourself. I want you to experience your true power.

This power does not come from forcing yourself to push through your defenses. This power comes from recognizing the invisible inner prison, connecting with your desires, and cultivating the internal safety to jailbreak from the confines of old traumas and into embodied, empowered life on the outside.