THE EMPTY CHAIR

To the Person Who Hurt Me

A trauma-informed space for anger, betrayal, fear, grief, boundaries and the words that were never heard.

> **This is not a confrontation exercise.** You do not need to contact the person who hurt you, send them what you write, forgive them, understand them, or listen to an imagined response. The purpose is to create a safer place for *your* voice.

When trauma silences a response

People often look back and wonder why they did not shout, leave, fight back or say exactly what was happening. But trauma responses are not carefully planned decisions. Freezing, appeasing, going quiet, disconnecting, complying or trying to keep someone calm can all occur when the nervous system is attempting to survive threat.

The words that come later can therefore carry enormous weight: “You frightened me.” “You crossed a line.” “I did not deserve that.” “I needed somebody to protect me.” “I am still angry.” The empty chair gives those words somewhere to land without requiring the other person to be present.

Before inviting them into the chair

First decide whether imagining this person is appropriate today. If merely picturing them makes the room disappear, triggers a strong flashback, causes severe panic or makes you feel trapped, use a less direct version. The chair could represent the harm, the silence, the institution that failed you, or a letter you will never send.

My choice today:

■ I can imagine the person at a safe distance.
■ I want the chair to represent what happened, not the person.
■ I will write without visualising anyone.
■ I am not ready for this exercise today.

Create an exit before you begin

Know how you will stop. Put your feet on the floor, keep the door open if that feels safer, choose a short time limit, and have a grounding activity ready. Remind yourself that you control the exercise now.

I am here: _____ **Today is:** _____

I will stop after: _____ **My grounding anchor:** _____

Say what was not safe to say

There is no requirement to be balanced, polite or eloquent in a private therapeutic exercise. Start with the sentence your body seems to be holding. Speak it, whisper it, write it, or simply read the prompt and notice your response.

What I want you to know

You hurt me when…

_____

What you did affected me by…

_____

What I needed from you was…

_____

Anger is not the same as danger

Trauma-related anger can be a response to violation, helplessness, injustice or a boundary that could not be defended at the time. Feeling anger does not mean you must act aggressively. You can allow the feeling to carry information while choosing safe behaviour.

My anger wants to say: _____

The boundary underneath my anger might be: _____

What I choose to do safely with this feeling: _____

The questions that may never be answered

You may have questions such as “Why did you do it?”, “Did you know what you were doing?”, “Why did nobody stop you?” or “How could you act as though nothing happened?” Some questions may never receive an answer that feels adequate. The exercise can acknowledge the question without making your healing dependent on their explanation.

You can refuse the debate

If you notice yourself mentally arguing your case, pause. You do not need to prove that your pain was real. The imagined person does not get to cross-examine you. This chair can remain silent.

I do not need your agreement to know that…

_____

_____

Body check

Notice whether your body is leaning forward, pulling back, becoming rigid, shaking, clenching or going numb. Try asking: “Do I need to continue, slow down, move further away, or stop?” Stopping is part of having control.

Boundaries, blame and what belongs where

Trauma can distort responsibility. People who were harmed may carry shame for not preventing something, for returning, for loving the person, for freezing, for keeping a secret, or for coping in ways they later judge. Chair work can help separate your survival response from the responsibility of the person who caused the harm.

Returning responsibility

I am no longer willing to carry responsibility for…

_____

The responsibility that belonged to you was…

_____

What belongs to me now is…

_____

Mixed feelings are allowed

The person who hurt you may also have been somebody you loved, depended upon, admired, missed or still care about. Trauma does not always produce simple feelings. Love does not cancel harm. Missing someone does not make what happened acceptable. Anger does not mean there were never good moments. You do not have to force your experience into one emotion.

Anonymous perspective

"I thought I had to sit there and tell them I hated them. What came out instead was, 'I wanted you to be the person I thought you were.' That was the sentence that broke through. I realised I was grieving as much as I was angry. I did not imagine their reply. I did not want one. For once, the conversation was about what I needed to say."

What I needed then / what I can offer myself now

Then I needed: protection / belief / comfort / an adult to intervene / information / choice / distance / reassurance / something else: _____

Now I may be able to build: clearer boundaries / safer relationships / support / self-trust / choice / professional help / something else: _____

Ending without forgiveness

You are not required to end with forgiveness. You might end with a boundary, a truth, a goodbye, a pause, or simply: "I am finished speaking for today." Healing and forgiveness are not synonyms.

My final sentence to the chair today:

_____

_____

Close the imagined room

Stand or change position. Look deliberately around your actual environment. Name the date and place. Notice colours and sounds. Take a drink, stretch, wash your face or hands, step outside, or move into an ordinary activity. Let your body receive the message that the exercise has ended.

A message from Maggie

Sometimes people carry the words they never got to say for years. They replay what happened and imagine the moment when they finally explain it perfectly enough for the other person to understand.

But your healing does not have to wait for somebody else's understanding. You do not need the person who hurt you to agree with your experience before it becomes real. You do not have to make your pain smaller because they deny it, minimise it or remember things differently.

This exercise is not about giving them another seat at the centre of your life. The empty chair is there for you. You decide how close it is, what it represents, what gets said and when the conversation ends.

And if all you can say today is, “You hurt me,” that is enough. If you cannot say anything at all, that is also information. There is no performance required here.

Books and resources

Trauma and Recovery — Judith Herman. Foundational work on trauma, safety, remembrance and reconnection.

The Body Keeps the Score — Bessel van der Kolk. Explores the effects of trauma across mind and body.

Gestalt Therapy Verbatim — Frederick S. Perls. Historical reading connected with Gestalt experiential practice.

Sensorimotor Psychotherapy — Pat Ogden and colleagues. Professional material on body-oriented trauma treatment.

Clinical notes and reference points

Empty-chair dialogue is most strongly associated with Gestalt therapy and has also been adapted within other experiential therapies. Trauma-informed use should prioritise safety, choice, pacing and the person's ability to remain oriented to the present. Direct evocative exercises are not appropriate for everyone or at every stage of trauma recovery.

When extra support matters

If this exercise brings persistent flashbacks, severe dissociation, overwhelming panic, urges to harm yourself or another person, or an inability to return to ordinary functioning, stop the exercise and seek appropriate professional or urgent support. In an immediate emergency, use local emergency services.

After-care check:
What do I need in the next hour? _____

Who or what helps me feel connected to the present? _____

One kind thing I can do after this work: _____

Space to Breathe Therapy

Trauma Library | The Empty Chair Series