THE EMPTY CHAIR

What I Never Got to Say

A trauma-informed guide to unsaid words, unfinished conversations and finding a voice without needing the other person to be present.

> **Important:** You do not have to complete an empty-chair exercise to heal. For some people, especially when trauma is recent, overwhelming, dissociative, or linked to an unsafe person, imagining the person in the chair may be too activating. You can stop, change the exercise, write instead, or work alongside a qualified therapist.

Why an empty chair?

Trauma can leave conversations unfinished. You may have frozen, gone quiet, tried to keep the peace, been too young to understand, or simply not been safe enough to say what you needed to say. Years later, the words can still feel present: anger, grief, questions, disbelief, protest, love, disappointment, or the sentence that begins, “I wish you had known…”

The empty-chair exercise creates a symbolic place for those words. You are not rewriting history and you are not required to forgive anyone. The purpose is to notice what has remained unheard inside you and to give it language, at a pace your nervous system can tolerate.

A note on the therapy tradition

Empty-chair work is strongly associated with Gestalt therapy, particularly the work of Fritz Perls, rather than being a technique developed by Sigmund Freud. Other therapeutic approaches may adapt dialogue, imagery and chair work in different ways.

Before you begin: check your safety

Look around the room. Notice where you are, what day it is, and what tells you that the traumatic event is not happening right now. Keep water nearby. Decide in advance how long you want to spend on the exercise. You might choose five minutes rather than trying to say everything at once.

> **Pause if you notice:** feeling unreal or far away; losing track of where you are; panic rapidly increasing; strong urges to harm yourself or someone else; flashbacks becoming difficult to interrupt; or feeling unable to stop the exercise. Re-orient to the room and seek appropriate support if needed.

Your grounding anchors

Write down three things you can use to return to the present: a person you can contact, a sensory object or activity, and a phrase that reminds you where you are now.

Person: _____

Sensory anchor: _____

Present-day phrase: _____

The conversation that never happened

Place an empty chair opposite you only if that feels manageable. You can also use a cushion, a piece of paper, a closed door, or simply imagine a safe distance. The chair does not have to represent the person who caused harm. It could represent an institution, an experience, your younger self, or even the silence that followed.

Start with what feels most true

There is no correct script. You can whisper, speak normally, write, type, draw, or say nothing and simply notice what arises. Try one prompt at a time.

I never got to tell you…

_____

_____

What hurt me was…

_____

_____

What I needed then was…

_____

_____

If anger appears

Anger can be information. It may tell you that a boundary was crossed, something mattered, or you were treated in a way that was not acceptable. You do not need to make anger polite in your private exercise. At the same time, expressing anger safely matters: use words, writing, movement or grounding rather than harming yourself, another person or property.

If grief appears

Sometimes the deepest grief is not only for what happened, but for what should have happened and did not: protection, tenderness, belief, an apology, a childhood, a relationship, or a sense of safety. You can name that loss without minimising it.

If nothing appears

Numbness, blankness and uncertainty are also responses. Trauma can interrupt access to words and feelings. “I don’t know what I feel” is a valid place to begin. You do not have to force memory or emotion.

What I want the chair to hear

Finish any sentence that fits:
- You should have known…
- I was only trying to survive…
- I needed you to…
- I am angry that…
- I am grieving…
- I no longer accept…
- The truth I want to say now is…

Body check-in

Trauma is not experienced only as a story. While you speak or write, notice your jaw, throat, chest, stomach, hands, shoulders and breathing. Do not interpret every sensation; simply notice whether your body seems to be asking for more space, movement, warmth, stillness or a pause.

Right now my body feels: _____

The strongest sensation is: _____

What might help me feel 5% safer: _____

You do not have to hear their answer

Some versions of chair work invite you to change seats and imagine the other person responding. In trauma work, that step is not automatically helpful. Imagining an apology can become painful; imagining criticism or denial can recreate the original injury. You are allowed to keep the other chair silent.

The goal is not reconciliation

Healing does not require contact with the person who harmed you. It does not require forgiveness, confrontation, or giving them another opportunity to explain themselves. The meaningful part of this exercise may simply be hearing your own voice say what could not safely be said before.

What belongs to me - and what does not

What is mine to carry?
My feelings, my choices now, my boundaries, my healing, my values.

What may not be mine to carry?
Another person's behaviour, their refusal to understand, the shame they placed on me, responsibility that belonged to an adult or authority, or the task of making the past acceptable.

Anonymous perspective

"For years I rehearsed the conversation in my head. In my version, they finally understood. When I tried the chair, I realised I did not actually need to persuade them. I needed to hear myself say that what happened mattered. I stopped halfway through because I was shaking. That was enough for that day. I came back to it later, but the first time taught me that stopping was also a choice I had now."

After the chair: closing the exercise

Closure does not mean the trauma is resolved. It means deliberately ending this piece of work so your nervous system is not left inside the imagined conversation. Stand up if you can. Move away from the chair. Name five things in the present room. Drink something. Wash your hands, step outside, stretch, or do something familiar.

Complete the ending:

The exercise is finished for today.
I am in _____.
The date is _____.
One thing I will do next is _____.
One person/resource I can use if I need support is _____.

Reflection - not analysis

You do not need to dissect everything immediately. Later, when you feel settled, you might notice: What sentence felt most important? What did you learn about a boundary or unmet need? Was there a point when your body told you to stop? What helped you return to the present?

A message from Maggie

There are times when the words we most needed to say could not be spoken. Maybe it was not safe. Maybe you were a child. Maybe your body froze before your voice could arrive. Maybe nobody asked. Maybe you tried to speak and were not heard.

The empty chair is not about performing recovery or finding the perfect words. It can simply offer you a place where your experience does not have to be edited for somebody else's comfort.

You are allowed to be angry. You are allowed to be sad. You are allowed to have mixed feelings about somebody who hurt you. You are allowed to miss someone and still recognise the harm they caused. And you are allowed to decide that today is not the day to open that conversation.

If you use this exercise, make it yours. Five honest words can matter more than a page you forced yourself to write. You can stop. You can come back. You can leave the chair empty.

Books and further reading

The Body Keeps the Score - Bessel van der Kolk. A broad exploration of trauma and its effects on body and mind.

Trauma and Recovery - Judith Herman. Foundational discussion of psychological trauma, safety, remembrance and reconnection.

Gestalt Therapy Verbatim - Frederick S. Perls. Historical source for understanding Gestalt practice and experiential work.

Sensorimotor Psychotherapy - Pat Ogden and colleagues. Useful professional reading on body-oriented trauma work.

Clinical and professional reference points

This resource is informed by trauma-informed principles that prioritise safety, choice, collaboration and avoiding re-traumatisation; by established descriptions of Gestalt chair work; and by contemporary trauma literature emphasising grounding, stabilisation and paced processing. It is educational material and is not a substitute for individual assessment or therapy.

When to seek additional support

Consider professional support if trauma memories, dissociation, panic, nightmares, self-harm thoughts, or day-to-day functioning are becoming difficult to manage. In an immediate crisis or if you cannot keep yourself or someone else safe, use emergency or urgent mental-health services in your area.

One final prompt:

If the chair could hold one sentence for me so I did not have to carry it alone, what would that sentence be?

_____

_____

Space to Breathe Therapy

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