



**LIFTING
HEAVY
THINGS**

Healing Trauma One Rep at a Time

LAURA KHOUDARI

FOREWORD BY LICIA SKY,
cofounder of the Trauma Research Foundation

PRAISE FOR *LIFTING HEAVY THINGS*

“An empowering guide for anyone who wants to experience exercise as an act of self-care, an exploration of strengths, and a practice of self-trust. More than just an introduction to lifting weights, this book shares a new way of relating to your body.”

—**Kelly McGonigal**, author of *The Joy of Movement*

“A unique and beautiful book on working with trauma and healing in an embodied way. This advice is both deep and practical, and can be used by anyone interested in a stereotype-breaking story about trauma and how we might heal from it.”

—**Ethan Nichtern**, author of *The Road Home: A Contemporary Exploration of the Buddhist Path*

“*Lifting Heavy Things* takes an innovative and timely approach to addressing trauma. This powerful, embodied practice, combined with a gentle and compassionate emotional perspective, is brilliant. This is a book I will use in my practice with clients working to heal trauma.”

—**Haven Fyfe Kiernan**, LICSW, psychotherapist and trauma specialist

“I wouldn’t be surprised to see a new movement revolution sparked by Laura’s genre-bending book. *Lifting Heavy Things* has ‘raised the bar’ by revealing how movement can be the satisfying basis of healing trauma.”

—**Dan Cayer**, Alexander Technique teacher and contributor to *The In-Between* newsletter

Copyright © 2021 by Laura Khoudari
Foreword copyright © 2021 by Licia Sky

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For a copyright license, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Cataloguing data available from Library and Archives Canada

ISBN 978-1-928055-77-8 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-928055-78-5 (EPUB)

ISBN 978-1-928055-79-2 (EPDF)

Editor: Jennifer Kurdyla

Copy editor: Sydney Radclyffe

Cover design and interior design: Morgan Krehbiel

Cover image: [iStock.com/vav63](https://www.istock.com/vav63)

Author photo: Viviana Podhaiski



Published by LifeTree Media, an imprint of Wonderwell

www.wonderwell.press



WONDERWELL

Distributed in the US by Publishers Group West and

in Canada by Publishers Group Canada

Not intended for resale or distribution

CONTENTS

Foreword | ix

My Trauma Story That I Never Tell | xiii

Author's Note on Privacy | xv

Introduction | 1

Take Action: Conduct Your Own Intake | 15

PART I: CONDITIONS

CHAPTER ONE: Preparing to Lift Heavy Things | 21

Take Action: Passing the Ball Back and Forth | 32

CHAPTER TWO: Shifting Your Relationship with Your Body | 35

Take Action: Reflect on the Habit of Negative Self-Talk | 43

CHAPTER THREE: Examining Your Workout Baggage | 45

Take Action: Unpacking and Repacking | 53

CHAPTER FOUR: Orienting to Your Space and Your Workout | 55

Take Action: Orienting to Your Space Through Sight and Sound | 63

PART II: ACTIVATION

CHAPTER FIVE: Fostering Your Mind-Body Connection | 67

Take Action: Establish a Mind-Body Connection During Warm-up | 74

CHAPTER SIX: Trauma and Time | 81

Take Action: Settle and Integrate | 89

CHAPTER SEVEN: Strength Training as an Embodied Movement Practice | 91

Take Action: Learn to Hip Hinge Mindfully | 102

CHAPTER EIGHT: Claiming Your Agency | 105

Take Action: Give Parts of Your Body a Voice | 113

CHAPTER NINE: Finding and Restoring Your Boundaries | 115

Take Action: Push Away | 121

PART III: RECOVERY

CHAPTER TEN: Increasing Your Resilience with Recovery | 125

Take Action: Steady-State Cardio for Active Recovery | 132

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Start Somewhere | 137

Take Action: Get Curious About Your Strengths | 144

**CHAPTER TWELVE: Healing Your Relationships and
Finding Connections | 147**

Take Action: Practice Co-Regulation | 155

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: (Not) Telling Your Story | 159

Take Action: Pause Before You Post | 168

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: What Moves You? | 171

Take Action: Pause Before You Move | 179

Resource Guide | 181

Acknowledgments | 185

Endnotes | 187

Index | 191

About the Author | 197

FOREWORD

TRAUMA IS AN UNSPEAKABLY TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE that overwhelms and incapacitates you. It also refers to the resulting underlying and overt feeling of being unsafe that remains in the body and that never completely relaxes. The deep-seated emotional and physiological residue of trauma changes the way you perceive and experience yourself and the world around you. The typical hair-trigger reactions of shutting down, or feeling the urge to flee or fight at the slightest suggestion of danger, become the norm and, in turn, diminish your ability to relate effectively to your world and life.

Traditionally in our Western culture, we have turned to talk therapists to help us make sense of these overwhelming experiences and resolve them. With a good, caring therapist, talking can get you to a place of awareness and acceptance of the events of your life. You may come to understand the reasons you react to triggering situations in certain ways, but understanding is often not enough to help change reactive tendencies or instill the confidence to find new ways of being in the world. In other words, people living with trauma may find that talk therapy alone cannot bring them the relief they are seeking.

For a fuller form of healing from trauma, we need to contend with the physiological states that correspond to our thoughts and emotions. We need to befriend our bodies and learn what is going on internally. This is what is often referred to as embodied awareness. Embodied awareness is not a fixed state that can be achieved once and for all;

it is a fluid and constantly shifting state that requires intention and practice to consistently reestablish as we move through day-to-day life. Paradoxically, embodied awareness can be extremely challenging for people living with trauma to practice, because the feelings of constant threat that trauma instills in the body can make tuning into the body's signals feel intolerably uncomfortable. Therapists who work with embodied awareness-based modalities strive to help their clients return to a sense of safety within their bodies so that lasting healing can take place.

I came to my practices of embodied awareness through personal exploration as a singer-songwriter, a yoga practitioner, a peer counselor; through meditation; through my thirty years of attuned awareness as a massage therapist; and through actor training in theater. Since 2012, I have been guiding embodied awareness experiences in the context of trauma workshops with Bessel van der Kolk, author of the esteemed book on trauma, *The Body Keeps the Score*. I met Laura Khoudari a few years ago at one such workshop I was coleading at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Massachusetts. She was a bright light in a room full of caring people from all walks of life, interested in learning about the role the body plays in the healing of trauma.

After the workshop, we connected on social media. Laura's posts filled me with awe and admiration. Here was this gentle and insightful weight-lifting woman, respectfully encouraging us all to become stronger inside and accept ourselves in the bodies we have.

I always thought that Laura's inspiring words would make a wonderful book, and this book is much more than I imagined or expected. In *Lifting Heavy Things*, Laura shares her techniques for reinhabiting the body through mindful movement and carefully guides us on a journey of self-exploration and courage, providing a step-by-step process of learning how to listen to and trust the self. Her writing voice is that of a warm, confident friend helping you to feel at home in the gym—a place that may not seem so friendly at first to some of us—and anywhere else you might choose to exercise. She generously shares her own journey to strength, as well as the techniques she uses with her clients. Then,

always gently and respectfully, she invites you to embark upon your own healing journey through writing prompts, physical exercises, sensory observations, and internal reflections.

This book is a steady, worthy companion for anyone interested in undertaking embodied healing work. May it help you find your way to self-compassion, self-acceptance, a sense of strength, and an embodied awareness practice that can serve you for a lifetime.

—Licia Sky, cofounder of the Trauma Research Foundation

MY TRAUMA STORY THAT I NEVER TELL

[]

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON PRIVACY

WHEN I TALK ABOUT MY WORK, I invariably mention that my interest in trauma-informed movement grew out of my own experience healing from PTSD following an acute trauma in 2014. People then often ask me, “Can I ask what happened?”

I reply, “No. I’m sorry.” My refusal is rarely challenged, and I feel my body relax with relief.

People ask this for different reasons: some because they care, others because they cannot help themselves. We all love a good story, and it’s often thought that a good story needs shocking events to keep an audience in its thrall. I disagree. I think a good story is character-driven and can be interesting without anything terribly exciting happening. (I hope you think so too, because I’ve written a book full of stories like this for you.)

People also share their trauma stories for different reasons, whether asked or not, but it has been my experience that people often don’t realize they don’t have to share. They might believe that, in order to ask for help or to be of help, they need to explain the details of what they went through. Again, I disagree—in principle and from experience. I believe we can receive and give help without telling our trauma story, or any other part of our story for that matter. Although trauma researchers and practitioners agree that when healing we need people with whom

to process our trauma story and confide in (both can happen with the same person), we don't have to share everything with *everyone*. We need not prove ourselves to be worthy of help. We do not owe anyone an explanation. And if someone continually asks for details and ignores your boundaries, it's fairly certain they are not a safe person. As such, throughout this book I will use the following marks when I feel the need to bring up the context of my own trauma story: []. Throughout the book, we will explore the healing quality of space, as represented typographically by these brackets and in the form of compassionate pauses—an allowance to go slow or even stop.

To that end, I want to address the way I incorporate my clients' stories in this book. I do so sparingly and have changed their details and blended their stories. I never share a personal trauma narrative (besides, I rarely even know it).

Lastly, I want to note that I began writing this book before the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, I was thinking deeply about how to convey that we all experience a variety of potential traumas: we lose someone we love; we are involved in accidents or get sick; we are victims of violence or social injustice. But as I neared finishing my first draft, I found myself writing about trauma in the midst of a society-wide trauma, the intensity of which many of us had never experienced before.

Trauma, at a base level, leaves us feeling disempowered, lonely, and fearful. COVID-19 has certainly done this for many folks by instilling fears of loss: the loss of jobs and economic stability, of a known way of life, and of life itself. Everyone is impacted in some way and to some degree. Although this book was not written specifically for life during a pandemic, that context has shaped how I talk in the text about trauma on a macro-level and about accessibility to physical training modalities.

In my own journey and professional studies, I have learned that trauma is the unprocessed physiological response to an overwhelming event or events. Trauma is *not* the narrative of what happened, but a result of the fact that whatever happened was too much or too quick for your nervous system to process in the moment. In turn, the trauma prevents you from moving through and completing your natural threat

response cycle, leaving you effectively stuck somewhere in that response even after the threat is gone. Your nervous system may still try to protect you from a threat that is no longer there. This leads to changes in your emotional and physical state that are likely dissonant with the present reality. As a trauma practitioner who works with the body, I have come to understand deep in my own viscera that we can help ourselves and others without focusing on the details of the narrative, but on the feelings, sensations, behavior, images, and meaning left behind. Whether you are working with an acute trauma, like assault or an accident, complex childhood trauma, generational trauma, or a larger societal trauma, it is my intention to help you learn how to tolerate the stress and discomfort it brings, no matter the narrative.

We can hold space for others and ask to be held ourselves without sharing our trauma stories. This book is, in part, an ode to feeling safe in our bodies and in the world. It is also a rallying cry for us to respect one another's humanity, agency, dignity, and privacy. In my work, I can help people without knowing their story—their body tells me all I need to know to guide them on their path to healing. You deserve that space. We all do.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN I WORK WITH CLIENTS INDIVIDUALLY, I understand and appreciate that they are making the choice to include me on their path. The same goes for you, dear reader. Experiencing your own agency is an important piece of trauma work, and I want to acknowledge that you are doing so in choosing to pick up this book. Thank you for including me as a guide on your healing journey.

What I also do when I start working with a client is introduce myself. As such, before we get started, I want to give you the opportunity to learn a bit about me as a practitioner as well as what to expect from this book.

MY EMBODIMENT JOURNEY

I am not your typical fitness professional. I became a trainer and intern at a barbell club in my late thirties. I decided to start my new career path because I felt called to become the trainer I had sought myself, but could not find, following []. I wanted a personal trainer who understood how trauma changes the way people experience their bodies and the world around them. It was my experience, which I later found was supported by research, that exercise had the power to help me heal, but could also exacerbate trauma symptoms.

Immediately following [] and before I started doing research, I longed to find a trainer or coach who understood this too and reflected back to me that they also understood what it was like to live with trauma—how hard it was to move well as I struggled

to tolerate daily life in my body. As alone as I felt at times, I found it hard to believe that I was the only person out there like me; I wanted to strength train, but trauma was making it difficult for me to feel safe while doing so. I found that without safety, healing was impossible.

And I was right. As soon as I began practicing as a trauma-informed personal trainer, clients around the globe reached out wanting to work using this approach. Over four years I have done some great work with individuals in person, but I want to be able to share the body-based modalities for healing trauma with more folks than I could humanly work with one-on-one. So I wrote this book.

Another thing that makes me different from many fitness professionals is that I am not a jock and never was. Growing up, I hated gym class and was confused by my friends who chose to play sports. Not immediately revealing myself to be coordinated or athletic, my gym teachers and classmates wrote me off as such. I thought I didn't really mind because I was happiest when I was sitting and reading, writing, drawing, or talking to friends (which matched the rest of the rebel persona I had adopted anyhow). But some part of me internalized the idea that I was unathletic and had no business in the gym. I interpreted that to mean my body was less deserving of love than those of my more athletic-appearing peers. Over time, this poor self-esteem around my body, in both its appearance and ability, made me increasingly disinterested in physical activity.

Flash forward twenty years and I have become a fitness professional, my accomplishments even highlighted by my college's alumnae association. The college (where, as a student, I had deigned to participate in mandatory PE for what I thought was the last time in my life) interviewed me for two publications and included a photo of me seated comfortably in workout clothes on a weight bench, a rack of dumbbells in soft focus in the background. Those photos revealed just how much had changed since I graduated. My hair still hangs in curls around my face, but they are no longer dyed purple. My body, still soft and average appearing, is considerably stronger than it was at twenty-two. The most

important change is not visible: I understand that my body is mine, that I am entitled to have boundaries around it and to take up space with it.

Next to my photo is a pull quote from the interview: *I came into my voice. And not only did I learn what I wanted to say, I felt ok saying it.* I was referring to my experience of gaining confidence at a women's college as an insecure teen, but these words also apply to my post-graduate experience: through strength training, as an adult woman, and as a trauma survivor. I went from resenting physical activity to doing it begrudgingly, then habitually, and eventually joyfully, over the course of fourteen years. Strength training helps me continue to step further into my power each day, including in writing this book.

The seeds of my own movement practice were planted back in 1999 when my back went out for the first time. It was the summer between my junior and senior years of college, and I was getting out of a chair at my student job when my back seized up all of a sudden. I could barely walk and spent the rest of the summer recuperating so I could be well enough to sit without excruciating pain in long seminars and lectures the next fall. The orthopedist I saw suggested that strength training could alleviate the pain. While I was relieved that he wasn't suggesting surgery, exercise felt punitive because going to the gym was all tied up in a messy knot with my experiences in physical education class in school, my poor self-esteem, and an internalized societal rejection of the shape and size of my body. I did the prescribed physical therapy and then promptly put strength training, and my body, on the back burner.

Three days a week at a local commercial gym, I saw my physical therapist, a reticent young woman with a shaved head dressed in the unofficial physical therapist uniform of a polo and khakis. On arrival I would get on the elliptical for five minutes or so and then we would head into the treatment room, where she'd spend thirty minutes doing soft tissue work on my back and adjacent muscles, relaxing their spasms enough so I could move. She often did this by finding a tender point with her thumb, knuckle, or elbow, and staying with it until it released. Then she would massage the surrounding area and move on to the next tender spot and

the next. Then we'd do a few core-strengthening exercises before going back to the elliptical for five minutes. It would be ten minutes the following week, and so on until I could tolerate thirty minutes.

After six weeks of physical therapy I returned to campus with a bit of a limp, a crush on my PT, and the intention of sticking with using the elliptical machine two or three times a week. The limp lasted for years, the crush for days, and my commitment to the gym not at all. I rarely used the elliptical in college. I would only go to the fitness center if nothing else worked for a flare-up of pain and to keep up the habit just until the pain stopped.

Seven long years later, I showed up at New York Sports Club to begin strength training. In the time since that bout of physical therapy, I lived my life by moving around carefully; I was only twenty-seven, but I was frequently in pain and always afraid of my back going out again. I had discovered yoga as one modality that helped reduce my pain levels and cultivated a regular practice, but I still couldn't be pain-free for more than five days. I finally accepted that I wasn't adequately managing my back pain and that my original doctor (not to mention my mom, who was urging me to meet her trainer) was probably right.

The day I showed up to my mom's gym, despite resisting it with every fiber of my being, turned out to be the start of a sustainable and healing movement practice. My first trainer, "Big Ed" Williams, who would become a mentor and lifelong friend, greeted me with a warm and genuine smile. (You'll get to know him better in this book.) Over the course of eight years, Ed would not only help me train to get out of pain; he would create space for me to find pride in my body, as well as have fun in the gym. By our last year of working together, I had also found the curiosity and courage necessary to try the competitive sport of weightlifting (also known as "Olympic weightlifting" or "Olympic lifting," presumably to differentiate it from the act of lifting weights to strength train). You may be familiar with the event from the summer Olympics, in which athletes use three lifts to get barbells weighing hundreds of pounds off the ground and up over their heads.

It took a couple more years before my movement practice evolved into its current form: embodied, healing, and joyful. Following [] I developed PTSD, and then sustained a second back injury that left me unable to do much of anything, especially Olympic lifting. In order to feel safe training, I decided to use movement to intentionally cultivate a relationship with my body; I listened to it more carefully and began to honor it, not just when it needed to move but also when it needed to rest. I had to, or else I ran the risk of getting hurt again and again, which would mean I couldn't train at all. I changed the way I approached strength training in order to heal my back first, then to protect my body. I had no idea that this mental process would also play a pivotal role in helping me heal my emotional and spiritual self, as well as my relationships with others.

DISCOVERING EMBODIED PRACTICE

I deepened my practice, while also achieving long-term training goals, through self-directed education and practical exploration. I sought out classes and studied with trauma teachers and practitioners who worked with the physiology of trauma. It was during my initial studies that I decided to become a certified personal trainer, so I cracked those books, too—my shelves now bend under the weight of the books I have read on the physiology of trauma, Somatic Experiencing, mindfulness practices, polyvagal theory and its application to healing trauma, trauma-sensitive yoga, and human movement. These are the various modalities I use myself and with clients, some of which we'll get into in this book.

In books and through experience, I've learned that our bodies have a lot of good information to share if we pay attention. This happens when we're in a state commonly referred to as "embodied," which is thrown around a lot in wellness circles without a very clear definition. We're all in bodies, right? So how can we not be embodied? Unfortunately, that's not quite everything.

When you are embodied, you are mindful of your body—its shape, weight, and density—and have the capacity to be aware of feelings and

sensations that arise from it as and when they do (not after or before). It may sound simple to be embodied, but for many people it's not—especially those living with trauma (we'll go into this in Part II).

I first figured out how to be embodied in the gym and then in the world. This process helped me discover what I was capable of and what my boundaries, needs, joys and fears are. I stumbled a lot along the way. I spent a lot of money and time on orthopedists and physical therapists, body workers and energy workers, hypnotherapists and talk therapists, mindfulness and yoga classes, personal trainers and weightlifting coaches, wellness retreats and workshops, feng shui experts, and of course, books on all of these subjects! Of the many therapeutic modalities I tried, some worked for me and others didn't.

By teaching you in this book how to listen to what your whole body tells you, I hope to help you bypass the services, modalities, and practitioners out there that don't align with what you want and need from your own long-term journey with healing through movement. From an embodied place, you will be better equipped to decide what is actually safe and healing for you, as opposed to doing things because others tell you they're safe and healing. Although my story is one that takes place primarily in the weight room, I know that yours may take place elsewhere—a Pilates studio, your own living room, or the great outdoors, to name a few places where embodiment may await you. The tools I share in these pages will work, no matter which movement sparks your curiosity and no matter where you practice.

ABOUT ME

I think it's important for you as my reader to learn more about me generally along with the parts of my daily experience that have shaped my work, because these formed the lens I bring to my work and my writing. My work grew out of all of my own lived experiences, and my healing and growing was shaped by many factors that go beyond my trauma. My experience has roots in areas where I have had tremendous privilege, such as wealth and perceived whiteness and heterosexuality, which gave me access to a private education from high school through

graduate school and have opened doors to networks of people who could help me. My privilege has also granted me access to excellent medical and mental healthcare, as well as making it possible for me to access many different wellness modalities.

My experience is also that of a Jewish American of Syrian descent who is not always seen as white. While I have benefitted from white supremacy, I have also experienced racism. I am queer and often assumed to be heterosexual because I married a cisgender man. I have experienced heterosexism. And like my sexuality, they may not be visible, but I am living with disabilities. I have experienced ableism.

I am also about a size twelve or fourteen. I have an average appearing physique. I mention this because although people come in all shapes and sizes, a lot of folks feel movement is off-limits to them, not because of ability but simply because they are not lean or small. I live in a body that is larger and softer than most fitness professionals', yet I work in the fitness space. I have been told by colleagues I don't belong because I am "unhealthy." They don't actually mean unhealthy—it is code for fat. In terms of my health, my bloodwork is excellent. I have healthy relationships, a fulfilling life, and a strong sense of my own boundaries. Those people, however, suffer from fatphobia. I have experienced body shame.

Professionally, I have worked with clients in barbell clubs, personal trainer facilities, and remotely with clients in their own homes or gyms. In barbell clubs, my clientele was diverse in age, gender, race and sexuality. My private clients tend to be white, cisgender women or gender non-conforming people in their late-twenties and thirties.

WHY STRENGTH TRAINING?

There are many movement-based modalities and more are being invented every day. For some of us, our movements can appear to flow one into the next, whereas others move more abruptly or forcefully. Some of us may move more stiffly and others appear floppy. But at the end of the day, our skeletons are designed to move in a finite number of ways; our joints hinge and sometimes swivel, our muscles contract and

relax, and our nervous systems make it all happen. Human movement in all its forms comes from the movement systems working together: muscles, bones, and nerves all communicating in the same language.

This really sunk in for me one day when I was in a yoga class practicing the pose Warrior III. About two years ago, after countless times doing the pose where you stand on one leg, lift the other leg behind you, and lean your upper body forward to make a T shape, I realized it's the same movement as a single-leg Romanian deadlift—something I'd done at the gym to improve performance. They are both hip hinges done on one leg. The only difference is the *assumed* approach to them. It is assumed in yoga that one is moving mindfully through the shapes, uniting breath with movement and maintaining presence of mind. That said, I know many people (past me included) who spend yoga class focusing on perception and performance—how to look the best, or even “win” doing yoga.

On the flip side, many folks assume strength training is all about performance and appearance. I am going to be honest with you: my unyielding desire to look like a strong badass is what got me under the barbell in the first place and is part of my motivation to keep coming back. But when I train now, it's no longer a performance or in the name of performance. I don't train to compete in weightlifting anymore and I don't expect to win anything when I'm done with a session. That mentality doesn't align with my own goals for training anymore.

I train to feel my body, uniting my breath to reps and focusing on what it feels like inside as my body moves against the resistance of the weight of kettlebells, dumbbells, barbells and more. In that way, I approach strength training the way one is intended to approach yoga. I train to deepen my relationship with myself and to feel my capacity for lifting heavy things. I train to be embodied.

Along with all of this awesome stuff, strength training—lifting weights, using weight machines, and training with resistance bands—benefits your heart, muscles, bones, posture, and balance. It makes you a more efficient mover and can eliminate certain types of chronic pain. It

improves your mood and promotes better sleep. On top of all of these benefits, the experience of getting physically stronger over time builds feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy, which is very empowering. While some of my clients have worked with me to become powerlifters, most of them are focused on everyday empowerment: being able to carry their groceries home, take long bike rides with their partners, or feel confident enough to take a group fitness class.

In terms of working with trauma, I find embodied strength training incredibly useful in cultivating a sense of safety within one's own body, as well as helping survivors identify what they need to feel safe in their environment and relationships. In her seminal book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Dr. Judith Herman, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, proposed a three-stage model for recovery from psychological trauma. The first stage is establishing a sense of safety, starting from within the body and then moving outward into the environment. She recommends “hard exercise” as one method to manage stress and promote a feeling of safety in the body.¹ She does not define “hard exercise,” but I interpret it to mean exercise that gets your heart pumping and activates your central nervous system. Depending on how you approach your workout, this can be done with resistance equipment to increase strength. More generally, she notes that any exercise gives survivors the opportunity to tend to their own body in a way that promotes a sense of autonomy. Herman also mentions that the first stage is a good place to address issues around interrupted sleep, insomnia being a common trauma symptom. Exercise that builds muscle like strength training has been found to be associated with better sleep.²

No modality works for everybody all of the time, but sometimes it feels like it should—in the case of trauma survivors, we might feel like yoga is supposed to work for us. Many trauma survivors, myself included, find yoga (even the trauma-informed kind) quite triggering. I note this because, although trauma-informed trainers, coaches and teachers in most modalities are scarce, you are likely to be able to find

trauma-informed yoga instruction if you live near a major metropolitan area. While trauma-informed yoga is relatively available, it isn't for everyone, and it can be disheartening (even devastating) if it doesn't work for you and you think it's the only form of exercise available to you as a trauma survivor. This was my own experience. I tried to return to yoga following [] and, though I previously had a regular practice for ten years, it felt like a physical and emotional minefield. On the other hand, I was triggered far less often by strength training and was able to bounce back from upsetting moments in the gym more quickly than from those on the yoga mat. You might find strength training to be supportive too, but you might also find another modality altogether as your sweet spot for embodiment.

That said, I firmly believe that any modality can be practiced in a trauma-sensitive way, and that people who are recovering from trauma would benefit from more information and options for trauma-informed movement practices. In a 2018 study of women survivors of sexual violence, most participants felt that engaging in exercise, whether it was high intensity (elevating the heart rate) or low-impact (like yoga), came with the risk of being triggered, especially in the early stages of recovery. At the same time, all participants also felt exercise was beneficial to their healing path.³

The truth is that when living with trauma, you run the risk of being triggered by all sorts of stimuli—even in environments designed to be therapeutic. As such, the questions to ask yourself if you want to start using movement in your healing work are: 1) What modality is least likely to feel triggering for me? and 2) How can I quickly recover from triggering moments? This book is partly intended to help you answer both questions for yourself, even if you don't choose strength training or don't do it exclusively.

WHY THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU

I have written this book primarily for anyone living with trauma who is curious about incorporating movement or exercise into their healing path, and I am writing to you as I would speak to a client. Therapists,

personal trainers, and other fitness professionals may also find this book useful as a model of how to use exercise to complement other healing practices.

When it comes to trauma, although we all have unique and different experiences, trauma symptoms impact the body in much the same way from one person to another. Clients come to me with post-traumatic stress disorder, postpartum depression, postpartum anxiety, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, depression, and anxiety. Clients have also come to me with experiences of addiction, eating disorders, and other conditions. While I'm not a specialist in any of these fields, lifting heavy things can provide support to people healing from trauma and mitigating its impact on their lives. The tools provided here are intended to be used by anyone as a complement to their healing process. However, working with me or with this book isn't a substitute for professional mental health or medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

I have tried to be inclusive in writing this book, giving consideration to issues around access and privilege. I remain committed to learning the ways in which my privilege has led to blind spots in my teaching while I continue to show up in hope of facilitating social change through my trauma work. I am a firm believer that no coach is for everybody, including me, but it is also my hope that many people with their own varied stories, backgrounds, and experiences feel seen, heard, and helped by this book.

HOW TO TRAIN WITH THIS BOOK

This book is broken into three sections: Conditions, Activation, and Recovery. This three-part structure mimics the flow of a workout I might design for a client or use myself.

In Part I, I explain how to establish what you'll need to create a trauma-healing movement practice. Before you begin a workout, you probably put on exercise clothes, gather necessary equipment and supplies (water bottle, yoga mat, etc.) and maybe head to a specific location. You are putting the conditions in place to exercise. In this section, you'll meet my favorite weightlifting coach, Coach Kenny, as well as the aforementioned

“Big Ed” Williams and a childhood bully of mine. Each of them, for better or for worse, helped me identify what I needed to put in place in order to feel okay before setting foot in the gym and training. We’ll look at how trauma impacts your nervous system and your tolerance for exercise, and we’ll explore shifting your mindset around exercise and giving you the tools to feel prepared and safe while you move.

Next, you’ll get to it and get active! Part II is about turning a movement practice into an embodied one. We’ll see how a regular practice of embodied movement while engaging in exercise can help you “feel into” your agency, and identify and enforce your boundaries. These skills are crucial to feeling safe enough to engage in healing work. In Part II you will read some client stories, hear from an expert in a trauma-healing modality called Somatic Experiencing, and meet a well-intentioned but pushy friend of mine. We’ll explore the ways trauma inhibits us from being fully present in our bodies, then delve into what an embodied movement practice is and the practicalities of creating one. We’ll also look at how the empowering benefits of this practice can radiate to other areas of your life as well.

Lastly, you’ll cool down—stretch, drink some water, and hopefully pat yourself on the back for taking the time to tend to yourself. You are setting yourself up for recovery. Part III goes into what life during recovery looks like once you have experienced embodiment, as you learn to connect with and listen to your body. In a workout, recovery happens after the session, but the healing journey is less compartmentalized and linear; as you learn to connect with yourself in Parts I and II, you may find yourself laying the groundwork for what is presented in Part III. I’ll introduce you to my grandmother Gloria, a 1982-era Jane Fonda, a counseling psychologist with a background in sports psychology and a passion for fitness, and David, my partner and true love. We’ll talk about recovery from a fitness perspective: the role of the cool down at the end of a movement session and how recovery from the stress of exercise helps build nervous system resilience. More broadly, recovery includes finding the right movement practice for you—one that is sustainable and, hopefully, joyful—as well as learning how to incorporate

other people in your healing, potentially sharing your story, and knowing what to do when you feel stuck.

At the end of each chapter, you'll see a section called "Take Action". This is a space for interactive exercises; some are related to working out or are writing-based, and some are about relying on the senses. These practical learning tools are intended to help you build an embodied movement practice that suits you and are by no means obligatory. I invite you to try these on your own schedule, whether that's as you read the book or by coming back to them later. I do suggest that you read each one all the way through before starting it. Each exercise begins with a brief explanation of why I chose it, a list of what you will need to do the exercise and the approximate amount of time it will take. The materials needed vary but are minimal.

While the suggestions and Take Action activities are designed to be accessible to beginners and experts alike, you get to decide if something is or isn't for you. And you get to change your mind. Please listen to your body and don't do anything that hurts or feels "too" anything—too hard, too slow, too fast, too stimulating, too boring. When something is "too" much of anything, there's a risk of feeling overwhelmed. If you find this to be the case, please don't hesitate to find support that feels right to you. This might be a movement coach, trainer, counselor, or another person with whom you do healing work.

And as always, check with a medical professional to see if any of the movements are contraindicated for you.

Like in a well-designed workout, the order of movements matters, and although I suggest that you make your way through this book as it is laid out, you don't have to. You can use this book however you want. Literally. Use it as a hand weight, or as a balance tool, or even as a coaster; but I think you'll get the most out of it if you read it in order, all the way to the end. You can always refer back to past chapters later, as the information and exercises do build on one another. That said, you may find it more useful to skip around according to your own healing journey and your experience with body-based healing practices, and you have the right to do so.

Each of you brings your own experiences to your reading of this book and each of you is at a different point along your healing path, so as you choose how much to read at a given time and at what pace, I want to remind you of something that is at the heart of healing from trauma: you are the expert in you. You are free to pause as often and for as long as you like, or to skip things entirely. This experience is yours. And while I am here as a guide, you are choosing this journey and you can choose to let me join you for a bit or not.

To that end, every time you are about to read, I invite you to take a moment to check in with yourself and pay attention to how you feel. Notice your surroundings: what do you see and hear? Ask yourself if where you are seated feels good. If not, I invite you to take a moment to adjust. Perhaps add a pillow behind your back or turn on a reading lamp, or get up and move to a completely different place. Take a minute to tend to your physical comfort as best you can.

As you read, I will invite you to pause—literally. Throughout the book, you will be prompted in writing to pause and take a moment to check in, and then to engage in a small act of self-care. This is something I do with both clients and myself after some heavy lifting. Please also feel free to pause even when I haven't prompted you. Check in with yourself and notice whether the words are sinking in and making sense or might as well be gibberish. If the concepts aren't sinking in, pause your reading. Maybe stretch or get a glass of water. Look around the room and listen. Ask yourself if you would like to keep reading. There are natural breaks in the book, but you may need pauses in different places to really take in and process what you are reading. That's okay. You picked up this book for you, so approach it at the speed that best serves you.

This book is also intended to be a point of connection between you and the larger world. With it, I hope to make the space necessary for folks living with trauma disorders to feel seen and have their realities recognized. Because at the root of it, trauma is a deeply isolating experience, yet it demands connection in order to heal. Although I had supportive, caring loved ones to help me with [], they couldn't understand that my experience of them and of the whole

world around me had since changed. I was different. Because I couldn't seem to convey my experience, I was alone in it and felt deeply misunderstood.

Then I started reading about the brain science of trauma, and the words on the page began to normalize the uncontrollable and confusing shifts I felt in myself. This foundation gave me hope that I could heal from what I'd feared was a permanent change. Writing this book has given me the opportunity to do the same for you, in my own voice, with the trauma-sensitive approach I take to lifting heavy things—both literally and figuratively. The process of writing was healing in itself because it asked me to pause, slow down and reflect on the path I've taken, and on the hard work that goes into healing. In those moments, I had the opportunity to appreciate the magnitude of what I have achieved. Healing is hard work and it's nice to really recognize that for myself, as I also recognize it for you.

When I part ways with my clients, I give them the tools to help their transition into the next stage of practicing movement with ease. So at the end of this book, I have done the same for you by including an annotated list of resources for further study. This list is by no means comprehensive as the field of trauma studies is rapidly growing, but it reflects the jumping off point for my own study and work. I now offer it as an entry point for you to deepen your own practice and continue to heal beyond our time together.

TAKE ACTION

Conduct Your Own Intake

Before I start training with a client, I conduct an intake, which serves a number of purposes. It allows me to understand their goals and identify any conditions they need to meet in order to train, as well as the resources, people, places and things that support them. Once I have this sort of information, I come up with a training program and recovery plan tailored to their goals, needs, and lifestyle.

In this exercise I'm inviting you to conduct your own intake, so that as you move forward with your own training program, with the guidance of this book and beyond, you'll know what conditions you need in place, what your resources are, and what your goals are.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED:

2-3 pieces of paper to write lists on

A writing instrument

A timer (optional)

DURATION:

About 20 to 30 minutes

1. IDENTIFY YOUR THREE MAIN REASONS FOR TRAINING

Take a blank piece of paper, set a timer for three minutes, and write down all of the reasons that you are considering training.

- Write down anything that comes to mind and don't censor yourself.
- After three minutes, circle the first three things that feel achievable or that you think you could make measurable progress in over the next three months. Don't think too much about it—just circle what jumps out at you. Acknowledging why you want to make a change in your life is not easy and being guided by your intuition can make that process feel more accessible and realistic.

Tuck this list away, put it on your fridge, or write it on your bathroom vanity with a dry-erase marker. You will refer to it again.

2. IDENTIFY THE CONDITIONS YOU NEED TO TRAIN

Set a timer for five minutes and, on a piece of paper, brainstorm the conditions you need in place to begin to train. Here are some things to consider:

- What are some of your environmental needs? This may include the type of facility, distance from your home, amount of space, and general equipment you'll need to pursue your goals, including clothing, footwear, and music.
- Do you need a formal training program, coaching, or group support?
- At what time of day would you need to train? Consider mealtimes.
- Do you require changing rooms or showers?
- Do you require gender neutral changing rooms or showers?
- Do you require elevators or ramps if the facility is not at street level?
- Do you require that the space upholds an explicit commitment to inclusivity?

After five minutes, review your list and circle anything that is a must-have as opposed to a would-like-to-have. That said, it is okay to circle everything on your list!

3. CREATE A PLAN TO PUT THOSE CONDITIONS IN PLACE

Now consider things you already have that will support your needs. For example:

- A gym membership and access to the gym
- Resistance bands, dumbbells, or other small equipment—even odd objects like books and backpacks and water jugs at home (see Chapter Four for more on setting up a home practice)
- A favorite playlist and some headphones

Put a check mark next to each condition that you can put in place now, without taking action. Now circle what you still need to figure out. For these remaining items you may have to do research or save some money, or you may just need to buy them. Make a plan to put these conditions in place that has concrete steps and action dates.

4. IDENTIFY YOUR RESOURCES

Next you are going to identify resources (people and things that support you in your life) that you can call upon as you pursue your goals. I invite you to answer the following questions:

- What hobbies or activities do you enjoy doing?
- Who supports you in your life?
- Do you have any pets? If so, name them.
- Did you ever play a sport? If so, which sport?
- Do you like to dance? If yes, which kind of dance? (Including random dance parties at home!)
- What's your favorite kind of music?
- Do you have a spiritual practice?
- Are you a member/volunteer of any club or organization?
- Do you have someone from whom you obtain regular counseling?
- Do you have any tokens or talismans with special meaning to you?

Review your lists. I suggest you keep them together and someplace close at hand, so as you go forward you can check in on reasons, needs, and be reminded of your resources.