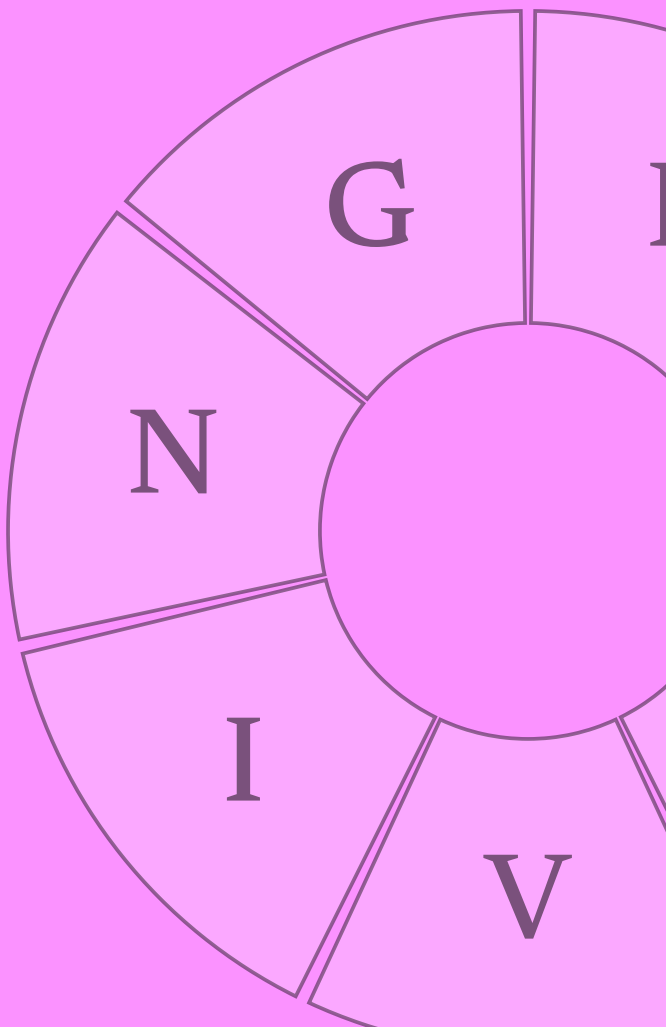
A FREE GUIDE FROM WOLCOTT COUNSELING & WELLNESS

BRAVING

The anatomy of trust

Seven signs you're with a safe person after someone broke your trust



Lisa Wolcott
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Wolcott Counseling & Wellness

BRAVING is part of Dr. Brené Brown's research on trust. This guide draws on her work with gratitude and full credit to her.

Before you start. This guide talks about betrayal, including betrayal by family and harm from people who were supposed to keep you safe. Nothing in it is graphic, but know that you can skip any page, put it down, and come back to it later. You don't have to trust anyone by the time you finish. If you need support right now, there are resources on the last page.

A NOTE FROM LISA

The second betrayal

Some of the people I sit with didn't lose their trust all at once. It happened twice.

First, someone hurt you. Then you told someone who should have protected you (a parent, a partner, a mentor, a best friend), and that person didn't respond in a safe, protective way. Maybe you called it a misunderstanding, or asked yourself, "What did I do to cause this?" Sometimes the person you told actually took the side of the person who hurt you.

Researchers who study childhood abuse keep finding the same thing: how a protective parent responds after a child tells them is one of the most important predictors of how that child heals. Being believed matters that much. And it's not just for children. Being believed as an adult matters too. So if you weren't believed, the heaviness you carry is not an overreaction. You were hurt by what happened, and then hurt again by what came after.

I've also watched people heal from this, even if the person who hurt them didn't say sorry, even if justice didn't come. What changed was their ability to identify the building blocks of trust and start to measure the behaviors that translate into safety. They learned to identify a safe person.

That's what this guide is for. It isn't about trusting the person who hurt you again. It's about learning to recognize the people who are safe, so the one who wasn't doesn't get to decide who you let close for the rest of your life.

It's built on Brené Brown's BRAVING framework, the seven parts of trust, which I use in my work as a Certified Daring Way™ Facilitator. I've added what I've learned from sitting with people who are rebuilding trust after betrayal, plus a little brain science, because it helps to know your reactions make sense.

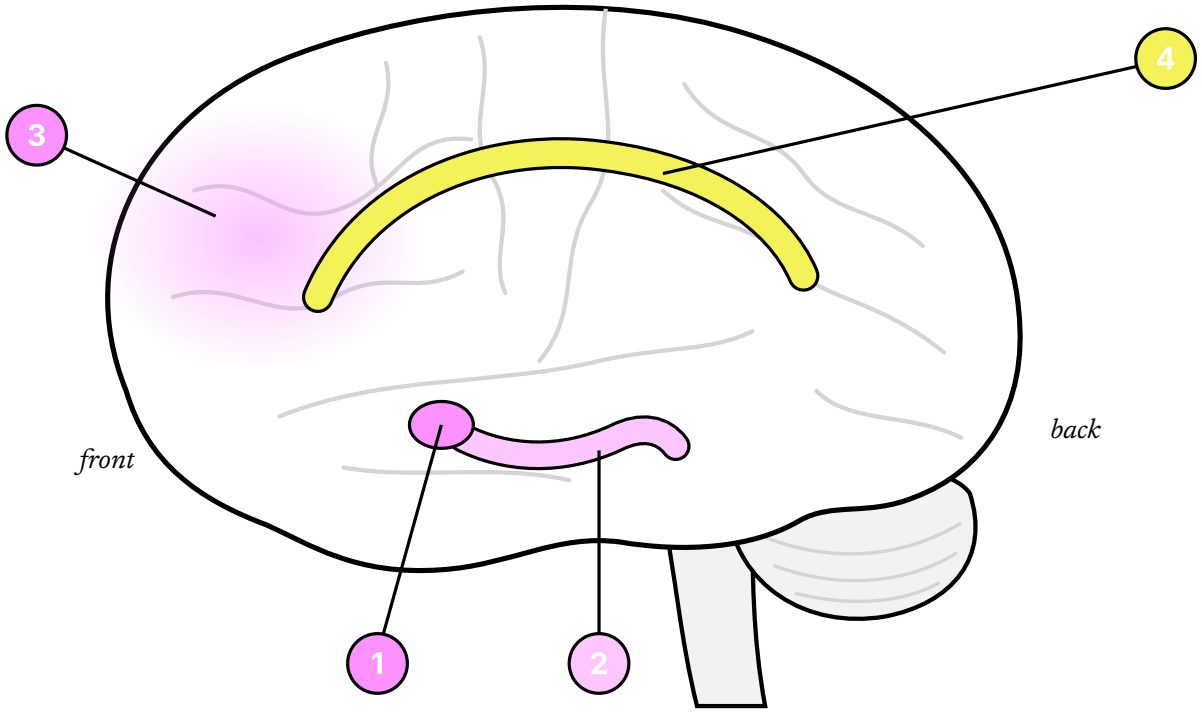
Take what helps. Leave the rest.

With love, Lisa

PART ONE · THE SCIENCE

Your brain on betrayal

When someone you depend on hurts you, your brain reads it as a threat to survival. For most of human history, being cut off from your caregiver truly was one. And for children, it always is.



1 **Amygdala** *the smoke detector*

Scans for danger before you're even aware of it. After betrayal it gets more sensitive, so a tone of voice or a late reply can set off the alarm.

2 **Hippocampus** *the filing clerk*

Stamps memories with when, where, and "it's over now." Under extreme stress it struggles, which is why an old memory can feel like it's happening right now.

3 **Prefrontal cortex** *the thoughtful adult*

Weighs evidence and calms the alarm. Stress hormones turn its volume down, which is why you can *know* someone is safe and still not *feel* safe.

4 **Anterior cingulate** *where it hurts*

Brain imaging studies suggest social rejection activates some of the same regions involved in physical pain. Heartbreak is closer to literal than we think.

Your radar isn't broken. It learned where the danger was real, and it takes some time and skill to teach your brain that things have changed.

PART ONE · THE SCIENCE

The chemistry of trust

The same chemicals that help you feel close to people are the ones that make betrayal hurt so much.

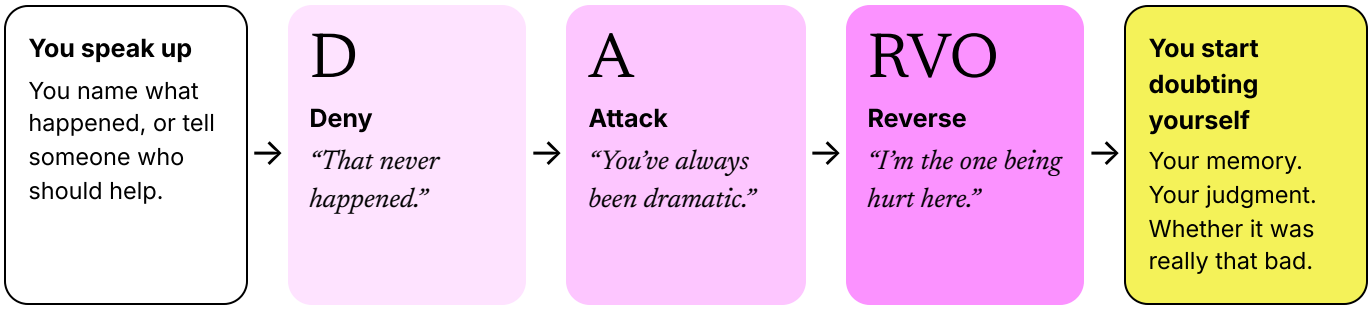
	WHEN TRUST FEELS SAFE	AFTER BETRAYAL
OXT	**Oxytocin** Linked to bonding and feeling safe with someone. Warm touch, eye contact, and being comforted all release it.	Closeness itself can start to feel risky, so warmth from someone new may set off alarms instead of calm.
DA	**Dopamine** The anticipation signal: *this is good, I want more.* It helps you look forward to time with people you love.	When affection came and went unpredictably, dopamine learned to spike on the uncertainty. That's one reason the least safe people can feel the most magnetic.
OP	**Natural opioids** The body's own comfort chemicals, part of why being held by someone safe feels soothing.	Losing an attachment can feel a lot like withdrawal. Researchers think part of that ache is chemical, which is why it can feel physical.
CORT	**Cortisol** The stress hormone that helps you handle a short-term threat, then settles once it passes.	When the threat feels ongoing, it can stay high: poor sleep, foggy thinking, a body that always feels braced.
EPI	**Adrenaline** Fight-or-flight fuel, along with its cousin noradrenaline. Faster heart, sharper focus, energy to act.	A hair-trigger alarm: jumping at small sounds, scanning every room, needing to know where the exit is.

Brain chemistry is more complicated than any one-page chart. Think of this as a map that helps your reactions make sense, not a diagnosis.

If you keep missing someone who hurt you, it doesn't mean you're weak or that you secretly want them back. Part of that pull is chemistry, and it eases with time and distance.

When speaking up makes it worse

Psychologist Jennifer Freyd named a pattern in 1997 that many survivors recognize instantly. When someone is confronted about harm they caused, they often respond with **DARVO**: they Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender.



Sometimes the DARVO doesn't come from the person who caused the harm. It comes from the family members, friends, or institutions who protect them.

What the research shows

Freyd's team found that the more DARVO someone faced when they confronted a person who hurt them, the more they tended to blame themselves.

It works on bystanders too. In experiments, people who read a DARVO response believed the victim less.

The hopeful part: when people learn to recognize and name DARVO, it loses much of its power.

Why you "didn't see it"

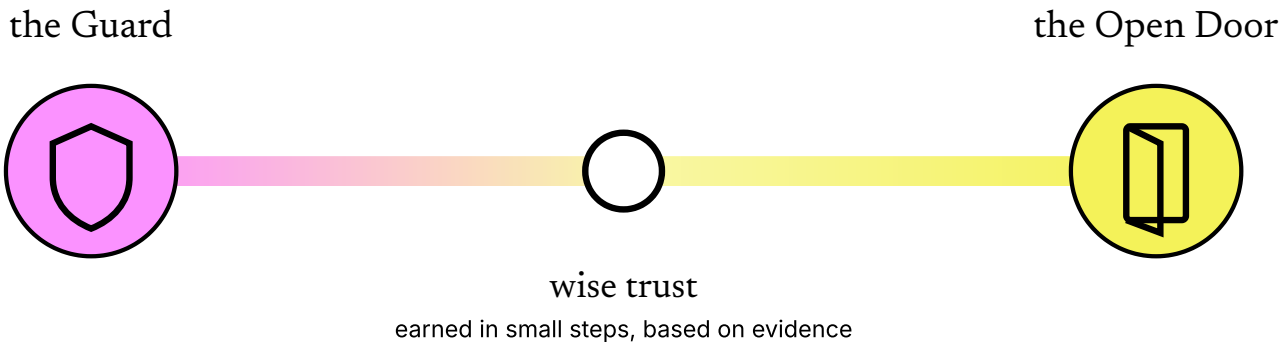
Freyd also describes **betrayal blindness**. When we're in a close relationship with someone who's hurting us, our mind protects us. We can't really see the ways we're being betrayed by someone who is supposed to care for us, because seeing it would put the relationship at risk.

If you've ever asked yourself, "How did I not know?" this is part of the answer. Not seeing was how you stayed connected to people you needed.

Self-trust is usually the first thing DARVO takes. It's also the first thing you can start rebuilding, without anyone else's permission.

Two protectors, one job

In Internal Family Systems (IFS), we see the mind as having multiple parts. Some of these parts are protectors, such as managers, and parts can get polarized with each other. For example, after betrayal, you might have two protective parts like these show up around trust. They look like opposites, but they're doing the same job.



The Guard trusts no one. It checks everything, keeps people at arm's length, and leaves before it can be left. Its message: *"Never again."*

The Open Door trusts fast. It explains away red flags and keeps the peace at any cost. Its message: *"If I'm good enough, they won't hurt me."*

Neither part needs to be fought or fixed. Both are trying to make sure you never get hurt like that again. They relax a little at a time as they see real evidence of safety, and BRAVING is a way to gather that evidence.

A note on accountability and justice

Sometimes it isn't one person who betrays you, and it isn't always a close relationship or friendship. Sometimes it's an institution: a university, a police department, judges and the wider justice system, a workplace. Psychologist Jennifer Freyd calls this institutional betrayal. Institutions can betray people, just as individuals can.

Justice and healing run on different clocks

THE JUSTICE CLOCK

set by courts, institutions, other people's choices *...maybe, maybe not*

THE HEALING CLOCK



set by you, and it can start today

If you've been betrayed and you're fighting for justice, I'm cheering for you. Accountability matters, for you and for the next person. I've also watched people put their whole lives on hold waiting for a verdict, an apology, or a family member to finally admit the truth. Some of those things come. Many don't, and people who cause harm walk away more often than they should.

Your healing doesn't have to wait for any of it. You can pursue justice and live your life at the same time. Healing is not the same as saying it was okay. What they did was wrong, and you still get a full life.

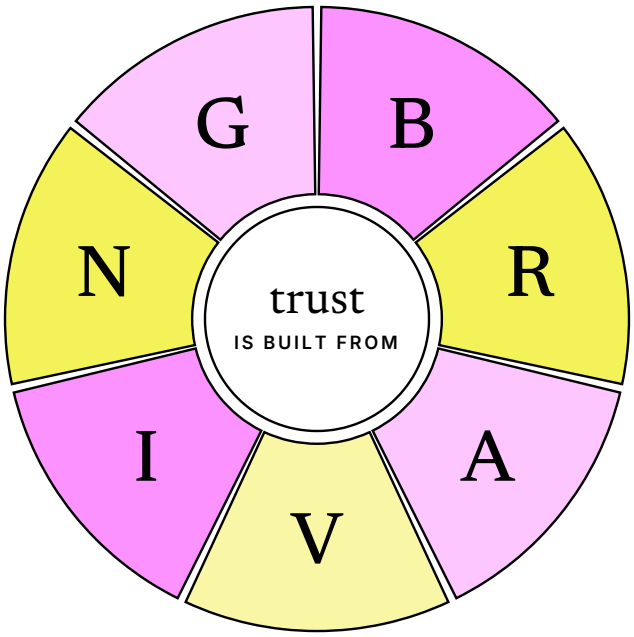
Live well. It is the best revenge.

I have this quote painted on a canvas on my wall, and I point to it often with people who are healing and really wanting justice. Sometimes, this is what justice looks like.

PART THREE · THE SEVEN PARTS OF TRUST

BRAVING

Dr. Brené Brown's research found that trust isn't one big feeling. It's made of seven smaller behaviors, and she organized them into the word BRAVING, because when we trust someone, we are braving connection with them.



- **B** — **Boundaries** · my no is respected
- **R** — **Reliability** · they do what they say
- **A** — **Accountability** · they own their mistakes
- **V** — **Vault** · what I share stays safe
- **I** — **Integrity** · they choose right over easy
- **N** — **Non-judgment** · I can ask for help without shame
- **G** — **Generosity** · they assume the best of me

Brown builds on a definition from Charles Feltman: trust means choosing to let something that matters to you be affected by someone else's actions. That's why it feels so risky after you've been hurt.

Why this helps after betrayal: "Can I trust them?" is a huge, scary question. Seven smaller questions are ones you can actually answer, with evidence, over time.

On the next pages, each letter has five parts: what it means, what betrayal may have taught you about it, a green flag to watch for, one thing to try, and a question for the protective part of you.

B

Boundaries

You're clear about what's okay and not okay for you, and so are they.

WHAT IT MEANS

You're clear about what's okay and not okay with you. They respect that, and they're honest about their own limits too.

WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

If the people who hurt you treated your "no" as an insult, your body learned that boundaries come with a cost. So you may soften them, apologize for them, or skip them.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

You say a small no, like "I can't make it Thursday," and nothing bad happens. No sulking, no guilt trip, no punishment that shows up two days later.

TRY THIS

Pick one low-stakes no this week. Watch what happens next, in them and in your body.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *What are you afraid will happen if I say no?*

R

Reliability

They do what they say they'll do, again and again.

WHAT IT MEANS

They do what they say they'll do, over and over. They're also honest about what they can't do, instead of overpromising.

WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

Big gestures. Grand apologies, flowers, promises that this time is different. When love came in dramatic waves, steadiness can feel dull, or even suspicious.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

They show up on time, text when they said they would, and remember the small thing you mentioned last week. Boring is a good sign here.

TRY THIS

For one month, keep a note of what someone *does* rather than what they promise. Let the list do the talking.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *What would it take for you to believe steady is real?*

A

Accountability

When they get it wrong, they own it and make it right.

WHAT IT MEANS

When they get something wrong, they own it, apologize, and make it right, without needing to be cornered first.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

You bring up a small hurt, and they can say “You’re right, I did that” without a “but” attached. They don’t turn your feelings into an attack on them.

WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

DARVO. You may have learned that naming a hurt starts a fight you’ll lose, so you swallow it before it reaches your mouth.

TRY THIS

Raise something small and low stakes. Afterward, notice whether you felt heard or put on trial.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *What happened the last time you spoke up?*

V

Vault

What you share in confidence stays with them.

WHAT IT MEANS

What you share in confidence stays with them. They also don’t bring you other people’s private things.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

Listen to how they talk about people who aren’t in the room. Brown calls closeness built on gossip about others “common enemy intimacy,” and it’s a warning sign.

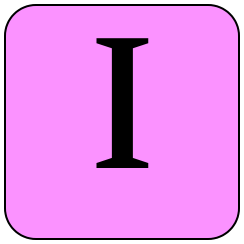
WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

Secrets were used as weapons: “Don’t tell anyone,” “This stays in the family.” Privacy protects you. Secrecy usually protects someone else.

TRY THIS

Share one small, true thing and see where it goes. Notice whether it comes back to you from anyone else.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *Whose secrets have you been carrying that were never yours to keep?*



Integrity

They choose what's right over what's easy.

WHAT IT MEANS

They choose what's right over what's easy or comfortable, and they act on their values instead of only talking about them.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

They stand up for you when it costs them something, even when it's awkward, and even when the other person is someone they love.

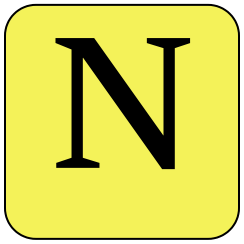
WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

You may have watched people choose their comfort, their reputation, or their marriage over your safety. Integrity was exactly what went missing.

TRY THIS

Notice what people do when doing right by you is inconvenient. That moment tells you more than a year of easy days.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *Who in your life has done the hard right thing, even once?*



Non-judgment

You can ask for help and they don't think less of you.

WHAT IT MEANS

You can ask for what you need, fall apart a little, or say "I don't know how," and they don't think less of you. You offer them the same.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

You say "I'm struggling," and they get curious instead of critical. They don't keep score or bring it up later.

WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

Shame. When you were blamed for what was done to you, asking for help started to feel like handing someone ammunition.

TRY THIS

Ask one safe-feeling person for something small. Afterward, notice whether you feel lighter or exposed.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *What do you think they'll see if I let them in?*

G

Generosity

They assume the best of you and check before judging.

WHAT IT MEANS

They give you the most generous reading of what you say and do, and they check what you meant before deciding.

A GREEN FLAG TO WATCH FOR

When you misspeak or mess up, they ask what you meant before they decide what you meant.

WHAT BETRAYAL TAUGHT YOU

One of two extremes. Some people stop offering good faith at all. Others keep offering it to the people who hurt them, explaining away what should never be explained away.

TRY THIS

Make two lists: people you give the benefit of the doubt to, and people who give it to you. Look at where they don't match.

ASK YOUR PROTECTIVE PART *Who has been getting generosity they haven't earned?*

BRAVING starts with you

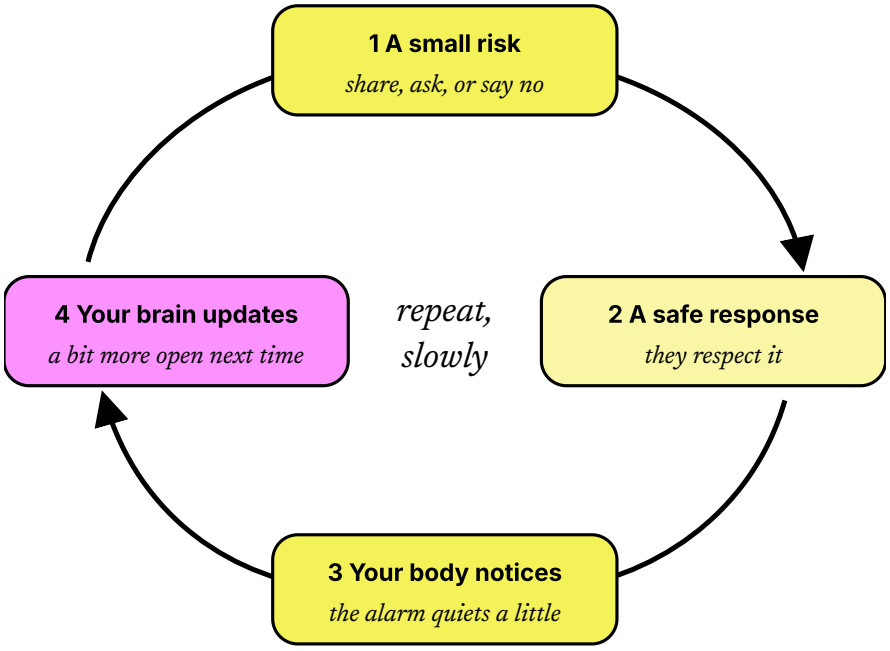
Brown points out that the same seven parts apply to how we trust ourselves. After betrayal, and especially after DARVO taught you to doubt your own memory, this is often where the rebuilding begins. Try these as an end-of-day check-in.

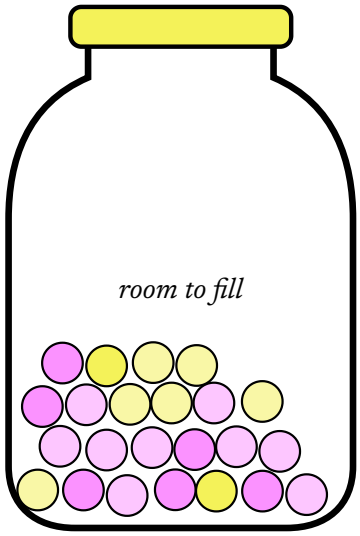
- **B** Did I honor my own no today, even once?
- **R** Did I keep a small promise to myself?
- **A** Can I own a mistake without punishing myself for it?
- **V** Did I share my story only where it's safe?
- **I** Did I act on what I believe, even a little?
- **N** Did I ask for help without calling myself weak?
- **G** Did I give myself the benefit of the doubt I give others?

PART FOUR · REBUILDING

How trust gets rebuilt, one marble at a time

Your brain is a prediction machine. Right now it may predict that closeness leads to hurt, because that's what the evidence showed. You can't argue it out of that prediction. What you can do is give it new evidence: small, safe experiences, repeated, until the prediction slowly updates. That's neuroplasticity, and it keeps working throughout your life.





The marble jar

Brené Brown compares trust to a jar of marbles. Every small moment of care adds one, and we trust the people whose jars are full. After betrayal, you're allowed to let the jar fill slowly, and you're allowed to count.

Start smaller than feels useful

The smallest risks teach the most, because they're the ones your nervous system can stay present for. Share a small preference, ask a small favor, say a small no, and watch what comes back.

You don't have to decide today whether someone is safe. You only have to notice the next marble.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

You don’t have to do this alone

Rebuilding trust happens in relationship, and sometimes the first safe relationship is with a therapist who will go at your pace.

Talk with our team

At Wolcott Counseling & Wellness, our therapists work with people rebuilding trust after betrayal, in families, in relationships, and in themselves. We draw on approaches like IFS, shame resilience, and relational work, at a pace that respects your protective parts.

Book a free consult · wolcottcounseling.com

If you need support right now

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call or text 988, any time, in the US.

RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline
800-656-4673 or hotline.rainn.org, free and confidential, 24/7.

This guide is for education and reflection. It isn’t a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, or crisis care.

CREDITS & FURTHER READING

BRAVING and the marble jar come from Dr. Brené Brown’s research on trust, first shared in her talk “The Anatomy of Trust” and explored in her books, including *Braving the Wilderness* and *Dare to Lead*. All rights to her frameworks remain with her. The descriptions, examples, and exercises in this guide are Lisa Wolcott’s own. Lisa is a Certified Daring Way™ Facilitator.

Definition of trust: Charles Feltman, *The Thin Book of Trust*.

DARVO and betrayal blindness: Dr. Jennifer J. Freyd. See Harsey, Zurbriggen & Freyd (2017), *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*; Harsey & Freyd (2020), same journal; and jjfreyd.com.

Caregiver support after disclosure: Zajac, Ralston & Smith (2015), *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and related research on maternal support following child sexual abuse disclosure.

Social pain and physical pain: Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams (2003), *Science*.

Institutional betrayal and institutional courage: Dr. Jennifer J. Freyd and the Center for Institutional Courage, which she founded. See institutionalcourage.org.