Trauma, Safety, and Recovering Choice · About 4 minutes

A Little More Choice Before You Feel Calm

Beginning with what would help you meet the present moment

The guide is already moving on. Yara has lost the thread, and the sound of everyone talking at once is getting hard to bear.

Yara is fictional. She has found unexpected noise difficult since an earlier frightening experience, and today she has barely slept. We cannot tell from this scene how much each factor matters. We can see that the way the tour is organized is making participation difficult.

Asking her to become calm before she can do anything else leaves out some practical possibilities. Could she get the information in print? Is there a quieter place to stand? Does she want to leave?

Start with the conditions

A little more choice may arrive through something outside you. Someone repeats a question. A door remains available. The person accompanying you agrees to wait rather than hurry you. None of these requires a complete account of why the moment is hard.

NIMH describes how reminders can evoke strong responses after trauma and how those responses vary.[1] Noise sensitivity alone does not establish PTSD or reveal a particular brain state. Sleep, health and the present setting all deserve consideration. If Yara leaves the tour, she does not need to return later to prove that she can tolerate it.

Looking around and noticing present information sometimes helps. It also has limits. A familiar room can contain genuine coercion, and a softly spoken person can ignore a refusal. Orientation cannot turn a harmful situation into a safe one. When protection or urgent care is needed, getting help takes priority over an exercise.

Judith Herman places recovery within relationships and real social conditions, including access to protection and resources.[2] That matters here. A person's needs should influence the form of help. If the only option offered is to stay and settle down, the help may be overlooking what that person is trying to say.

What would make this moment more workable?

Stay with the tour for a moment. Remaining with the group might suit Yara if she wants to continue and can follow enough to enjoy it. Printed information might give her more control over the pace. Leaving might be the most useful choice today. Each option has conditions: information must be available, exits accessible, and help willing.

You do not have to choose for her. The exercise is simply to notice how different the question becomes when participation, rather than calmness, is the starting point.

An adjustment may help only a little. It may fail to help at all. That gives information about the situation and the support required; it does not grade Yara's effort. She may realize only afterward that she needed less pressure.

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If distress, detachment or difficulty functioning persists, individual professional care can help clarify what is happening, including medical possibilities. For now, a repeated question or a practical way to leave may be the next useful thing. A person can ask for either while still feeling unsettled.

On the tour, there is also a practical question about what Yara can hear from where she is standing.

There will be more of the tour. For this stretch, a quieter place to stand might give Yara a chance to hear the next sentence.

Companion reading · When the Past Arrives Before You Can Think

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Trauma, Safety, and Recovering Choice (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] National Institute of Mental Health. (2023). Post-traumatic stress disorder (NIH Publication No. 23-MH-8124). Source.

[2] Herman, J. L. (1998). Recovery from psychological trauma. Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences, 52(Suppl.), S145–S150. Source.

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