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Topic: An Examination of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *Marvel's Jessica Jones*

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 General Background:

Marvel's Jessica Jones was widely acclaimed for its compelling depiction of the mind-controlling harms that assault and rape can inflict on the victims. The first season of the series centres around the character development of Jessica Jones, a former superhero turned private investigator, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after having been previously enslaved and sexually abused by Kilgrave, a man who can control minds. The plot revolves around his unrelenting pursuit to entrap Jessica and thwart Jessica's attempts to rebuild her life away from him until a case forces her to confront her dark past. Her no-nonsense 'do whatever and however I like' approaches in dealing with the dangers around her and the various cases she helps to solve reveals her to be an anti-hero who, while bent on helping others close to her, is also vulnerable and fragile at the same time, as she steels herself to break free both physically and psychologically from her abusive past.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental disorder that typically develops in victims after exposure to threats on a person's wellbeing or even life, such as warfare or, in the case of this research paper, sexual assault. The mass media has often misrepresented victims of PTSD as dangerous, ignorant and abnormal (Hunter, 2014). These misguided depictions are usually amplified on the female victims, who are demonised to an even larger degree than their male counterparts. Female PTSD victims are commonly associated with stereotypes like "the homicidal maniac", "narcissistic parasite", "seductress", "rebellious free spirit", and at the same time also "specially gifted" (Hanley, 2015). The varying motivations underlying their behaviours are often not well analysed.

Jessica Jones enjoys high viewership since the series were released in 2015 on Netflix, praised by both the general public as well as critics. The latter noted the correlation in the total amount of PTSD coverage and discussions in *The New York Times* when all the episodes of the first series premiered in November of the same year (Houston, Spialek & Perreault, 2015).

This research paper thus aims to employ Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and its corollary archetypes to evaluate the effectiveness of the character tropes caricatured in the series as well as to conduct an in-depth analysis of the antihero Jessica Jones through the feminist lens for a closer understanding of the multifaceted harms and pain sexual abuse wrecks on its victims.

1.2 Rationale:

Jessica Jones, the eponymous antihero created by Melissa Rosenberg, based on the Marvel Comics, is apt for the analysis of PTSD female victims as she receives the most amount of screen time as a victim of rape-induced PTSD. The titular character displays symptoms of the disorder that affect her from carrying out daily activities and impede her investigative work. She is forced to deal with her traumatic past and face her PTSD when she attempts to protect other young women from their/her rapist, a man with the superpower to control minds. Using

the feminist lens to analyse the depiction of Jessica and her PTSD, this research hopes to highlight the complex interplay of factors causing PTSD, as well as its symptoms and the coping mechanisms of its female victims.

The character tropes in the series will be compared against Jungian archetypes to examine how these character types are used as foils to scaffold the character development of the female protagonist. The series creator's portrayals of the various supporting characters are not one dimensional; many of them have had to deal with their own psychological demons which haunt their lives and this includes the antagonist Kilgrave, the Jungian archetype of the Trickster, whose villainy is explained through his unloved childhood where he was the guinea pig for his parents' hubristic experiments.

1.3 Research Questions:

1. What are the different physical and psychological manifestations of troubled victims of PTSD?
2. To what extent has Melissa Rosenberg accurately and effectively portrayed the characteristics and behaviours of PTSD female victims in her antihero Jessica Jones?
3. How effective are the supporting characters in *Jessica Jones* as foils to the titular character and to what extent have they contributed to a greater insight into the complex nature of her psyche?

1.4 Thesis Statement:

Season 1 of *Jessica Jones* accurately portrays the lingering ramifications of prolonged sexual abuse through the various psychological struggles of its eponymous antihero in overcoming PTSD. The supporting characters have been successfully created to further highlight the complex and multifaceted harms that would complicate the attempts of victims of such abuses to regain control of their lives.

1.5 Scope of Research / Delimitation(s):

This paper will be analysing only the first season of *Jessica Jones*, with a primary focus on its titular character and her various struggles with PTSD and what she has become as a result. A second season was released this March and has been critically lauded, but it is too recent for this research paper to include it in during evaluation.

1.6 Significance of Research / Usefulness:

The value-add of this paper is that it uses Jungian archetype theory to explain the popularity of the series. Most current reviews fail to analyse the use of the supporting characters around Jessica as foils to her character development. As such, the significance of this research is in using the aforementioned theory to show how the whole cast of the series are just as important in showing representative aspects of the complex nature of a troubled but redeemable antihero Jessica Jones. Furthermore, most literary analyses of Jessica Jones have painted Kilgrave as an irredeemable form of evil incarnate. However, this paper contends that Kilgrave is himself a morally complex antagonist who cannot be force-fitted into the moral dichotomy of "good versus evil". Thus, this paper also hopes to contribute to existing academic work on the series by providing a more comprehensive understanding of moral ambiguity in the series through a fresh lens.

1.7 Limitation(s):

The second season of *Jessica Jones* would probably add value to this research paper due to the sharing of similar overarching themes as the first season, therefore it could make the

current analysis more layered with more source material to deconstruct the creator's intention. However, due to time constraints, this paper will only be analysing the first season of the series. Should this paper be revisited, source material from the second season could be used to further substantiate, or maybe even dispute, the Jungian theory and feminist lens used to analyse this first season.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Literary Theories for Analysis

This study adopts the Jungian archetype theory to analyse the series, making the cast act as foils to Jessica's character development and highlight the themes of PTSD and sexual abuse in her.

Besides the reference to Jungian archetype theory to understand the character tropes in the series, this paper will also reference two other theories to assist in providing additional depth to the analysis. They are Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious and Jung's trauma complex theory.

The former is to understand the moral ambiguity and rationale behind the actions of the protagonist Jessica Jones, as well as the antagonist Kilgrave, while the latter theory will attempt to examine the formation of autonomous complexes in their respective psyches. Traumatic memories may trigger dissociation complex to protect the ego from being overwhelmed, but if the dissociation complex is subsequently triggered, it can compete with the ego for dominance of the conscious personality, potentially resulting in PTSD.

Both theories will be useful in explaining how and why the characters of the series behave in a certain manner.

2.2 Jungian Archetype Theory (Jung, 1902)

Jungian archetype theory asserts that universal, mythic characters, i.e. archetypes, reside within the collective unconscious of every individual (Jung, 1902). Archetypes represent fundamental motifs of experience as humankind evolves. Jung was of the opinion that this collective unconscious was not "merely the hiding place of demons but the province of angels and ministers of grace, which he called the 'archetypes'". The 'archetypes' represent humankind's endeavours to "work toward unity, health, fullness of life, and purposeful conscious development" (Jung, 2003).

Although a somewhat superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal, there is a deeper layer which is not derived from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition – it is inborn and is known as the collective unconscious. In contrast to the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious is largely similar in every individual and personal factors do not determine this.

It is therefore suggested that archetypes are physical manifestations of the collective unconscious within the mind of every individual and represent his/her suppressed desires. One behaves in a certain way because of repressed desires that have not been fulfilled. Archetypes are universal and do not apply to a select group of individuals, rather, they apply to everyone because every individual possesses repressed desires and conforms to a set number of archetypes in their attempts to satiate said desires.

For example, one archetype present in the series is the child. Contrary to what the name of the archetype may suggest, the child may not necessarily represent purity – in fact, the child, as an archetype, is often used to symbolise longing for innocence, rebirth, and salvation. This

manifests itself within Jessica, the protagonist. At the start of the series, Jessica is evidently broken and desires rebirth after her traumatic experiences at the hands of Kilgrave. Although she tries to put her past as a sex slave behind her and rebuild her life by working as a private investigator at a law firm, the disappearance of Hope Shlottman, a fellow victim of Kilgrave's mind control, forces her to confront him once and for all. In this process, she experiences salvation by dealing with and overcoming her post-traumatic stress disorder. This salvation climaxes at the final confrontation, whereby she ultimately achieves catharsis through taking the life of her rapist, Kilgrave, and preventing him from destroying the lives of many more women.

2.3 Freud's Theory of the Unconscious

Freud (1924) theorised that the mind split into three distinct entities – the id, ego, and superego, or what Freud called “the psychic apparatus”. These are not physical regions within the mind, but rather hypotheses of important mental processes. The id, ego, and superego have most commonly been conceptualized as three essential parts of the human personality.

The perennial problem of the id, ego and superego is that they cannot exist together – they are constantly in conflict because one is always incompatible with the other and must fight to satisfy different needs. The superego develops during adolescence and is responsible for ensuring moral standards are followed. The superego operates on the morality principle and motivates one to behave in a socially responsible and acceptable manner. Therefore, if the superego is overridden by one of the other two entities in the unconscious, the individual no longer follows a moral code and will do anything to achieve his/her aims. The id refers to one's instincts, while the superego refers to one's morality. Thus, this paper will focus more on the superego as it governs morality and the consequent behaviour of individuals.

The superego is constantly being overridden in the series. The id of Jessica Jones constantly competes with that of her superego – although she is the protagonist, she does not follow a particular moral code and makes morally ambiguous decisions for the greater good, which is to defeat Kilgrave. The prime example for this is the final confrontation where Jessica kills Kilgrave instead of letting him be trialled by the justice system. Although the superego wants her to capture him and exonerate the victims of his mind control who were forced to do things against their will, her id triumphs over her superego – she realises that he is morally incorrigible after trying in vain to convince him to change for the better, thus deciding to kill him and prevent him from ever harming a woman like what he had done to her.

2.4 Jung's Trauma Complex Theory

Jung's trauma complex theory explains how trauma promotes the formation of autonomous complexes in the psyche. In binding traumatic memories and images, the dissociated complex protects the ego from being overwhelmed. However, the complex can be subsequently triggered and can compete with the ego for dominance of the conscious personality, causing neurotic conflict, or more serious disorders, i.e. post-traumatic stress disorder in Jessica Jones.

Jessica's entrapment and consequent rape by Kilgrave have clearly left their mark on her. She is in a somewhat depressive state, engaging in a life of debauchery such as sleeping around and consuming alcohol excessively to deal with the trauma inflicted upon her by Kilgrave. Jung's trauma complex theory is evident here – she does not wish to deal with her inner demons, instead she turns to an introverted and self-indulgent inner world where she feels she has some degree of control over.

2.5 Medical Research

This paper will be using medical research to determine the accuracy of different physical and psychological manifestations of troubled victims of PTSD. The United States Military has previously defined symptoms of PTSD as:

- Persistent memories of the “trigger” event, nightmares, re-living the event over and over;
- Not talking to anyone about the event, avoiding any situation that may trigger bad memories;
- Feeling numb and detached, depressed, disinterested in normal life activities; and
- Feeling on high alert all the time, always watching for danger.

This paper will therefore compare the symptoms of PTSD displayed in Jessica after Kilgrave’s rape and those displayed in real life. If they matched, an accurate portrayal of PTSD will have been achieved by the show’s writers.

Jessica’s PTSD is not merely mentioned in one scene, rather, it is the main focus of the entire season. The plot, when distilled, is largely centred on how her entire life now revolves around her trauma and her attempts to move past it.

2.4 Conclusion

In this research paper, Jessica Jones’, and to a certain extent Kilgrave’s, behaviours will be analysed via the Jungian archetypes, Freud’s theory of the unconscious and Jung’s trauma complex theory to provide the theoretical scaffolding in understanding the coping mechanisms of Jessica Jones, namely her PTSD. This analysis will also be amalgamated with critics’ reviews of the series to provide greater insights from different perspectives for a more thorough research undertaking.

Chapter 3: Discussion

3.1 On Kilgrave

Kilgrave is the antagonist of *Marvel’s Jessica Jones*. Once subject to his parents’ hubristic experiments to treat his neurodegenerative disease, he consequently gains the powers to control minds. He uses his powers without ethical consideration to fulfil his personal gain, enslaving his parents and becoming incredibly cruel. He keeps Jessica as his sex slave for several months and even after she has broken free of his control, he continues to be obsessed and fascinated with Jessica, torturing innocent civilians to win her back. When she tries to apprehend him, he is upset at the betrayal and sets out to kill her. He is eventually cornered and killed by Jessica.

Kilgrave embodies the Jungian archetype of the Trickster with his twisted sense of humour: his inherently manipulative nature; as well as his dual nature as an unloved individual who desires intimacy and as a sadistic madman who stops at nothing to win Jessica’s affection; going so far as to kill his own parents. His repressed desires for affection are due to yet another one of the Trickster’s character traits - exposure to torture and consequent self-approximation to the figure of a saviour. Due to his pitiful past as a guinea pig for his parents’ hubristic experiments, he now exploits his newfound powers to force others to care for him via mind control. However, his ultimate goal is genuine emotional intimacy that he lacked as a child, and thus he pursues Jessica fervently to make her love him without having to resort to his superpowers. He also has delusions of grandeur and believes that his superpowers make him

a god, which eventually leads to his downfall. He is the epitome of the Trickster – a man with an unfortunate past who now uses his powers misguidedly to disrupt the status quo so as to serve himself.

As the Trickster, Kilgrave ironically serves as the foil for much of Jessica's character development. After continuously raping her for six months via mind control, she escapes from him a broken woman. The mental damage inflicted upon her includes PTSD. She employs various methods to overcome PTSD, such as forming a support group for those also traumatized by Kilgrave. Associative film techniques are also used to show causal link between her and Kilgrave in that whenever Jessica experiences a PTSD-induced flashback, the lighting becomes a tinted purple, the favourite colour of Kilgrave. Although she has physically escaped him, the mental scars left by his torture are not as easily gotten rid of. Her flashbacks traumatize her and render her incapable of functioning normally in her daily life, often freezing during a flashback. This is exacerbated by her traumatic flashbacks being triggered by mundane occurrences and places - a hotel or a table at a certain restaurant.

Kilgrave forces Jessica to adopt both healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms for dealing with her trauma. Unhealthy methods include alcoholism and emotional unavailability – she is unable to open up and engage in a meaningful romantic relationship with Luke Cage. Her healthier methods include helping fellow victims of Kilgrave and consulting Trish for moral advice. Finally, Kilgrave provides the denouement of Jessica's character development – when he is killed by Jessica at the harbor; his death provides closure for her and the many other victims of his. He can no longer destroy the lives of innocents, and those affected by his rampage are given the opportunity to move on and heal from their various mental scars. In the case of Jessica, this allows her to begin to overcome her PTSD having the assurance that Kilgrave never harms anyone ever again. She no longer relies on autonomous complexes in the psyche binding traumatic memories as flashbacks to cope with her PTSD, instead removing the trigger factor of her PTSD directly. The ego can no longer be overwhelmed and this causes Jessica to move towards the first step of recovery.

Jessica's PTSD inflicted upon her by Kilgrave is consistent with real-life PTSD. With her torture as a victim of Kilgrave's mind control acting as the "trigger event", she experiences flashbacks and nightmares of her time under his control. She is emotionally distant and is too deeply traumatized to form emotional connections after the ordeal. Overly paranoid, she suspects even people on the street as Kilgrave's pawns, displaying realistic symptoms of PTSD victims, especially in the context of rape. She also uses a variety of methods to cope with her guilt and trauma, similar to most PTSD victims. Thus, it can be seen that an accurate portrayal of PTSD has been achieved in the series.

3.2 On Kilgrave's Parents

Albert and Louise Thompson (hereinafter referred to as the Thompsons) are the parents of Kevin Thompson. When their son was born with a degenerative brain disease, they focused their efforts experimenting on him instead of caring for him. The agonizing experiments Kevin went through gave Kevin the powers to control people's minds and he eventually puts his parents under his control. After hiding from their son for decades out of fear, the Thompsons are reunited with their son, now called Kilgrave, who subsequently murders Louise and forces Albert to strengthen his powers before killing him.

As per Jungian archetype theory, the Thompsons are Magicians – they had a dream to cure their son of his disease using their scientific genius. However, their plan went awry when they turned him into an uncontrollable monster. Although the Thompsons, like the archetypal Magicians, are incredibly talented, their greatest fear has always been that of “unintended negative consequences” resulting from their efforts to realise their visions. Their fears are later proven to be well-founded when they realize they had unwittingly given their son powers without ethical considerations for their usage.

Before Jessica reunites the Thompsons with their son, she accuses them of "playing God" and being irresponsible by not containing the threat of their son. They retort that they “loved (their) son”, and they only “wanted a cure, and found one.” The Thompsons “didn't know about the side effects” until it was too late. They had been negligent towards Kilgrave, leaving him to fend for himself after he nearly caused his mother to kill herself. In their quest to cure their son, they had been blinded by the potential implications of their experimentation on him, to the point where they could not control his powers and eventually becoming victims of the psychopath they had themselves created. They realized early that they could not contain the monstrosity they had created, and thus had chosen to escape from him instead of dealing with him as responsible parents.

The Thompsons are the indirect cause of Jessica’s physical and mental torture. They made the conscious decisions to experiment on their son and allowed him to run amok, ruining the lives of countless others, including Jessica’s. Jessica, angry at their irresponsibility, snaps that they “could have told someone or done something”, and that theirs “aren't the only lives that little Kevin has destroyed”. By choosing to run from the inhumane cruelty Kilgrave inflicts upon others, they are complicit in harming the victims of Kilgrave as well. Jessica, having been damaged by the sexual assault of Kilgrave, continues to suffer from symptoms of PTSD, including flashbacks and unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as alcoholism, that affect her ability to function normally in her daily life. Jessica has clearly not forgiven the Thompsons, wishing she “had a mother of the year award so (she) could bludgeon (Louise) with it”. Jessica merely sees them as the means to end the threat of Kilgrave and does not feel sympathy for them despite the havoc unleashed upon them by their son.

It is only their deaths at the hands of their son that motivates Jessica to destroy Kilgrave once and for all. When she finds Albert bleeding out, he tells her to kill his son in his last words. This triggers the realization in Jessica’s unconscious that it is impossible to reform Kilgrave after the harm he had caused to his victims, and this culminates in her eventually killing him instead of letting him be tried and punished by the law. Due to the Thompsons’ deaths, her id defeats her superego, causing her to choose pragmatism over morality. While the superego compels her to let justice take its course through legal avenues, the id tells her that Kilgrave is too dangerous to be left alive, convincing her to take Kilgrave’s life instead.

3.3 On Trish Walker

Patricia "Trish" Walker is the adoptive sister and best friend of Jessica Jones. Overcoming her past, as an abused child star that had led to a drug addiction, to become a radio show host, Walker becomes instrumental in Jones' quest to stop Kilgrave.

Trish Walker is the epitome of the Jungian archetype of the Caregiver. Her core desire is to protect and care for Jessica, ensuring that she is safe from danger. She is compassionate and generous, offering Jessica the option to live at her apartment and supports her financially after Jessica's escape from Kilgrave. She constantly reminds Jessica that her getting raped by Kilgrave was not a decision she had the agency to make, and none of the damage caused by Kilgrave was her fault. When Jessica wishes to help Hope Shlottman bring Kilgrave to justice, she warns her of the danger and possibility of a repeat scenario where Jessica would only harm herself again. However, she eventually relents and urges Jessica to stop Kilgrave for the greater good. These examples show that Trish is the voice of reason for Jessica and provides the incentive for Jessica to keep fighting Kilgrave to protect her.

Trish plays an indispensable role in Jessica's character development. She acts as Jessica's moral compass, encouraging her to pursue Hope Shlottman's case when she learns of the similar experiences both Jessica and Hope had undergone under Kilgrave's control. Although possessing no superpowers of her own, Trish provides Jessica support in her quest to capture Kilgrave, going so far as to interview Hope on her radio show to absolve her of guilt in the public eye and to prove that Kilgrave is real.

She also acts as the catalyst for Jessica to achieve catharsis in overcoming her PTSD. In Jessica and Kilgrave's final confrontation, he threatens to rape Trish continually for the rest of her life and make her his slave while her mental state rots away. The thought of losing the only person she has ever cared for drives Jessica to overcome the fear of her former rapist and thus acts as a building block for her to overcome her PTSD. The id, once again, triumphs over the superego. With the life of the only person she has ever cared for at stake, she realizes that it is necessary to end Kilgrave's life and protect Trish at all costs.

3.4 On Luke Cage

Luke Cage is another superhuman who has super strength and unbreakable skin. Cage meets Jessica and starts a relationship with her. However, Luke is then forced to break up their relationship upon discovering that Jones was involved in the murder of his wife due to the influence of Kilgrave. Following his encounter with Jones and Kilgrave, he then moves away in order to build a new life separate from Jones.

Luke represents the Jungian archetype of the Lover. He desires emotional intimacy and a meaningful relationship after the death of his wife. He believes he has found the perfect lover in Jessica. However, he was initially unaware of Jessica's dark past before falling in love with her. He is horrified when he discovers Jessica is one who had killed his wife and she had slept with him. He feels betrayed and it takes an encounter with a jealous Kilgrave, in which he is forced to kill himself, to understand that it was Kilgrave who had controlled Jessica's mind and forced her to kill his wife.

Jessica's character development is closely intertwined with Luke's. As the Lover, the sense of betrayal he feels after he learns of Jessica's involvement in his wife's death causes Jessica to feel guilty. The guilt which she has worked very hard to overcome resurfaces when she is reminded that the death of Luke's wife had also damaged her loved ones. She tries to distance herself emotionally from Luke to avoid feeling the guilt from killing his wife, although she was then under Kilgrave's control, but it proves to be futile.

However, there is a reversal of roles when Luke falls victim to Kilgrave's mind control in attempting to kill Kilgrave. He complies with Kilgrave's instructions to blow up his bar when Jessica enters it so as to kill both of them. However, the plan is foiled when Luke detonates the explosives prematurely and he walks out of the bar unharmed due to his superpowers. He then feels the same guilt previously experienced by Jessica. Although he had acted under the effects of mind control, he still feels complicit in trying to betray and kill Jessica and thus apologises to her. In this scenario, the table has been turned and Jessica is now the one offering assurance to him, comforting him that the murder attempt is not his fault. From this incident, Jessica is shown to be empowered; from a guilt-ridden victim of Kilgrave, she turns into a heroine in her own right, helping fellow victims of Kilgrave recover from guilt and other trauma-related impacts of his mind control.

Luke also embodies societal perceptions of female PTSD victims that consequently affect their characteristics and behaviours. Parallels can be drawn between him blaming Jessica for his wife's death and victim-blaming in rape cases today. Often, society is ignorant of the power asymmetry the rapist uses as leverage against his victims, and conveniently scapegoats the victims as attracting unnecessary attention by wearing scantily clad clothing and "asking for it". Similarly, Luke refuses to accept the fact that Kilgrave had used Jessica to kill his wife, and uses the more convenient line of thinking that Jessica had killed his wife of her own volition. Victim-blaming often causes victims of rape to feel even more guilty than they should. Jessica empowers said victims via her convincing Luke that killing his wife was not her choice, but Kilgrave's. Both she and real-life rape victims do not have agency in the aforementioned scenarios. Rape is squarely the fault of the rapists, and not the victims'.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

4.1 On the Portrayal of PTSD

In conclusion, Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and its corollary archetypes have successfully evaluated the effectiveness of the character tropes caricatured in the series and antihero Jessica Jones through the feminist lens for a closer understanding of the multifaceted harms and pain sexual abuse wrecks on its victims. Furthermore, symptoms of and coping mechanisms for PTSD in the series have been scientifically consistent with that of real life.

This is relevant to society as the series actively combats societal perceptions of PTSD victims. By making Luke understand that his wife's death was not Jessica's fault but Kilgrave's, it criticises and disproves the concept of victim-blaming. It illustrates the lack of agency the victims of sexual abuses face in such scenarios. Respectful and sensitive representation in media, as in the case of this series, is important for victims of PTSD to make them feel accepted for their differences rather than ostracised. This facilitates their recovery from the trauma inflicted upon them by PTSD.

4.2 On Character Development

Jungian archetype theory has also proved that supporting characters in *Jessica Jones* act as foils to the titular character and have contributed significantly to a greater insight into the complex nature of the protagonist's psyche. The supporting cast scaffolds the character development of Jessica. Through their individual character arcs, they serve as the rationale for Jessica to operate in her own morally ambiguous fashion to defeat Kilgrave, thereby

evolving from a guilt-ridden victim of Kilgrave, she turns into a heroine in her own right. This in turn empowers victims of PTSD in real life, providing them a role model and a positive character arc to emulate and overcome their own fears, thereby being better able to deal with the trauma often associated with PTSD.

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