

Processing looks like:

1. That happened. (*experiencing*)
2. That happened and it means this? Yes, even though it was unfair, wrong, etc. (*accepting*)
3. That happened, it mean this and I feel how I feel about it. (*validating*)
4. That happened, it means this, I feel how I feel and it means I need to do this. (*learning from it*)
5. That happened but I've learned from it and can move on with new knowledge. (*letting it go*)

So you would answer the questions:

- What happened?
- What does it mean for/to/about me?
- How do I feel about what happened and what it means?
- What do I need to do about these things?

For example, let's imagine that what happened was you engaged in behavior that you feel was not OK. So what does that mean? Well, it means that you were obviously triggered in some way, so we can look for what. Look at how you felt in the moment. Were you angry? Sad? Frustrated? Feeling ignored? Lonely? Once you have isolated how you felt, you can look at why you felt that way.

So maybe the answer to, "What does it mean for/to/about me?" would be, "I felt frustrated because I was not being listened to and that makes me feel as if I don't matter, so because of this, I behaved in a way that I believe was not OK." Then we can look at why the trigger causes you to feel that way. Where did this idea come from that you don't matter? Why is it so powerful that you would be pushed to act outside of your character or make choices you wouldn't ordinarily make? These things are often rooted in our past. By following the trail of feelings backwards, you can find the root cause(s) and identify what you need to address. Then you can look at the next question, "What do I need to do?" and you have a place to start because now you know what the problem(s) is/are. For example, if the problem is that you felt you didn't matter, you have now identified and can address that wound within you. It's important to be as honest with yourself as possible when doing this. Otherwise, it loses its effectiveness.

This helps enormously because it puts you in a position of action. You are actively taking steps to make sure this does not happen again. And you will have to learn to forgive yourself for what you did before you had the tools you have now. There is a lot of self-betrayal involved in toxic or abusive relationships, where we made choices that we knew were not healthy or in our own best interest. We have to work through these things so that we can make sure they don't happen again, and the best way to do that is to acknowledge this is in fact what happened. Writing an apology/forgiveness letter to yourself is a very good exercise for this. You can do the same thing about your feelings to others. You can write letters to them in which you acknowledge your mistakes or behavior that was not OK. You don't have to send them (and in the case of toxic or narcissistic people it is usually better not to reach out in this way), but writing them helps a lot. If you don't send them, you can say everything you really need to say, knowing they will never see it. This is enormously freeing. After all, the person who really needs to hear it is you.