

Hercules and the Hydra: Explaining **Avoidance** and **Gradual Exposure** in Trauma



Hercules was a Roman/Greek hero who was given many hard tasks. One very difficult task was to slay the Hydra, a scary nine-headed creature. Someone who has experienced **trauma** is a bit like Hercules because the person has to face the scary thing that happened to him or her. How did Hercules do it? Well, Hercules first tried to cut one of the hydra's heads off, but it didn't work! Two heads would grow back instead of one. In trauma, people do the same thing when they **avoid** thinking or talking about the trauma. **Avoidance** works for a little while, but it ultimately gives the trauma more power over how the person feels—it's like the hydra growing another head.

Hercules did not give up though. He was able to defeat the hydra with the help of his nephew who used fire to prevent the hydra's heads from growing back. With trauma, the technique we use to keep the trauma from growing stronger is called **gradual exposure**, in which increasing exposure through talking or writing about the trauma decreases the trauma's ability to control our thoughts and feelings. Just like Hercules turned to his nephew for help in slaying the Hydra, someone who has experienced trauma can turn to a **therapist** (who might be a counselor, social worker, or psychologist) for helping overcoming the difficult thoughts and feelings linked to the trauma.