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Trauma Disorders and Trauma Recovery by Charlie in Stephen Chbosky's Film *the Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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ABSTRACT
Psychological trauma is one of the psychological conditions that may influence an individual's emotional stability, behavior, and ability to establish interpersonal relationships after experiencing distressing events. This research examines the traumatic disorders and the stages of trauma recovery experienced by Charlie, the main character in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012). The analysis employs a psychological approach by applying Judith Herman's (2015) theory of traumatic disorders and trauma recovery. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method adapted from Azallin (2025). The primary data consist of dialogues and scenes taken from the film, while the data were collected through documentation. The analysis was carried out using close reading proposed by Barry (2017) to interpret the psychological meaning reflected in the narrative and the main character's experiences. The findings indicate that Charlie experiences two forms of traumatic disorders, namely Terror and Disconnection, represented by four selected data. The recovery process is reflected through three stages, Healing Relationship, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection, represented by six data. These findings show that Charlie's unresolved childhood trauma shapes his emotional responses, social interactions, and perception of himself throughout the story.

Keywords: psychological trauma, trauma recovery, judith herman, psychological approach, the perks of being a wallflower

INTRODUCTION
Literature is a form of artistic expression that uses language and narrative to explore human experiences, emotions, perceptions, and social relationships. Through literary works, authors represent individual struggles and social realities while conveying meanings that encourage readers to reflect on human life (Nikam, 2025). Eagleton (2020) explains that literature extends beyond conventional storytelling by representing and criticizing various aspects of human existence, including internal conflicts, social injustice, and individual aspirations. Literary works can foster empathy and critical awareness by allowing readers to encounter different perspectives, moral values, and psychological experiences (Mar *et al.*, 2011). Nussbaum's perspective, as discussed by Lourens (2010), emphasizes that literature enables individuals to understand experiences beyond their own and develop greater moral sensitivity.

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Literature also provides a means of examining cultural tensions and human relationships across different historical and social situations (Eagleton, 2010). These characteristics extend to film, which employs visual imagery, dialogue, characterization, and narrative structures to represent complex human experiences. As a form of creative expression, film therefore provides a valuable medium for examining psychological conditions and the influence of past experiences on individual development (Tan, 2013).

Trauma is a psychological issue frequently explored in literary works and films because of its effects on an individual's emotions, behavior, self-perception, and interpersonal relationships. Psychological trauma may be represented through emotional distress, anxiety, social withdrawal, fragmented recollections, and difficulties in establishing relationships. Such manifestations are often revealed gradually through dialogue, character interactions, memories, and visual expressions rather than through direct explanations of a character's psychological condition. Examining trauma in literary and cinematic narratives allows researchers to investigate how past experiences influence present behavior and contribute to character development (Kurtz, 2025). These portrayals show how individuals respond to distressing experiences and gradually work toward emotional stability. One film that explores these psychological issues is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, directed by Stephen Chbosky and adapted from his novel of the same title. Although the novel uses an epistolary form that gives readers direct access to Charlie's thoughts and emotional struggles, the film communicates his psychological experiences primarily through dialogue, visual elements, and character interactions (Chbosky's, 2024). Despite the differences resulting from adaptation and cinematic time limitations, both versions retain their central themes of adolescent identity, friendship, and the lasting influence of past trauma.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower portrays Charlie, an introverted adolescent who experiences emotional difficulties while navigating the challenges of adolescence, forming friendships, and developing his sense of identity. Throughout the film, his emotional distress, social withdrawal, and responses to personal experiences suggest the lasting influence of unresolved trauma. Nadia (2023) explains that Charlie's traumatic experiences are gradually revealed through his interactions, emotional reactions, and recollections, which include indications of repression, anxiety, and emotional detachment. One revealing moment occurs when Charlie discusses his deceased aunt with Sam and states that she was his favorite person in the world until her death, suggesting the continuing emotional significance of this relationship. This conversation provides an opportunity to examine how traumatic memories may remain influential even when a character does not openly explain the full extent of his suffering. However, Charlie's emotional responses must be interpreted through the film's narrative evidence rather than treated as sufficient proof of a clinical diagnosis. The film's portrayal of his experiences also raises questions about how individuals cope with trauma and how supportive relationships may contribute to their psychological development. Although previous discussions have examined Charlie's adolescent identity and psychological struggles, examining the types of trauma he experiences and the stages of his recovery offers a clearer picture of his psychological development.

This research applies Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework to examine the traumatic disorders experienced by Charlie and the stages through which he progresses toward recovery in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Herman's framework provides a theoretical basis for understanding trauma recovery through three stages: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life and relationships. Using this framework, the research examines the film's dialogue, narrative events, character interactions, and visual representations to identify evidence relevant to Charlie's psychological experiences and recovery process. The analysis also considers how his responses to traumatic memories and his relationships with other characters contribute to the representation of emotional distress and

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personal change. The research is guided by two questions: what traumatic disorders or trauma-related manifestations are experienced by Charlie, and what stages of trauma recovery are represented in his experiences throughout the film? Accordingly, the first objective is to identify the trauma-related manifestations experienced by Charlie, while the second is to explain the stages of trauma recovery represented in his character development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the traumatic disorders and trauma recovery experienced by Charlie in Stephen Chbosky's film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Qualitative research is an approach that produces findings through the interpretation of non-numerical data rather than statistical procedures or other forms of quantification. It can be used to investigate human behavior, social activities, historical experiences, and other phenomena that require an in-depth understanding of their underlying meanings (Azallin, 2025). Meanwhile, descriptive research aims to describe and interpret existing conditions, relationships, ongoing processes, consequences, and developing trends (Efendi, 2024). These approaches are appropriate for this study because the research focuses on interpreting dialogue, character behavior, emotional responses, and narrative events that represent Charlie's traumatic experiences and recovery process. The primary data source is the film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, directed by Stephen Chbosky, with a reported duration of 1 hour and 42 minutes, accessed through Netflix (https://www.netflix.com) on October 25, 2025. The researcher also uses the film script, identified as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012) Movie Script, obtained from Subslikescript, as supporting material to verify dialogue and understand the context of relevant scenes. The data consist of selected dialogue, gestures, character interactions, and narrative events related to Charlie's trauma and recovery.

The data are collected through documentation techniques, which involve gathering and examining recorded materials, written documents, and other relevant forms of evidence. Documentation can include literary and creative works, films, photographs, and other materials that preserve information for research purposes (Azallin, 2025). In this study, documentation is used to identify and organize scenes that show the traumatic experiences and recovery process of Charlie. The data collection process consists of three steps. First, the researcher watches the film repeatedly and carefully to identify dialogue, gestures, emotional reactions, and narrative events relevant to the research questions. Second, the researcher reads the film script several times to verify the dialogue, clarify the context of particular scenes, and identify additional passages related to trauma and recovery. Third, the researcher records and classifies the selected data according to the two research objectives, namely identifying Charlie's trauma-related manifestations and examining the stages of his trauma recovery. The classification is guided by Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework, particularly the stages of establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. Through these procedures, the researcher organizes the collected evidence systematically while considering the relationship between the characters' statements, their behavior, and the events depicted in the film.

The collected data are analyzed using a descriptive qualitative technique to answer the research questions and interpret the representation of trauma and recovery in the film. According to Bogdan's perspective, data analysis involves the systematic process of searching for and organizing research materials so that the findings can be understood and communicated effectively (Henny, 2024). Qualitative data analysis also involves organizing findings, presenting relevant evidence, interpreting meanings, and developing conclusions through a continuous analytical process (Uin & Banjarmasin, 2018). Following these principles, the researcher conducts three stages of data analysis: data reduction, data display, and verification. First, data reduction involves selecting, simplifying, and classifying relevant dialogue, gestures, and narrative events while excluding information unrelated to the research objectives.

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Particular attention is given to scenes that provide evidence of Charlie's trauma-related experiences and changes throughout his recovery process. Second, data display involves presenting the selected evidence through descriptive narrative explanations, including relevant dialogue, scene contexts, and interpretations based on the theoretical framework. Third, verification involves examining the consistency between the collected evidence, the research questions, and Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework before drawing conclusions. Through these stages, the researcher interprets the film's representation of Charlie's psychological struggles and evaluates how the narrative portrays his progression toward recovery without treating cinematic evidence alone as a clinical diagnosis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Traumatic Disorders Experienced by Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Psychological trauma can influence an individual's emotional stability, memory, self-perception, and ability to establish meaningful relationships. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie's psychological struggles are represented through his emotional responses, fragmented recollections, avoidance of painful memories, and difficulties connecting with others. Drawing on Herman's (2015) discussion of traumatic experiences, this analysis examines two manifestations of trauma in Charlie's characterization, terror and disconnection. Terror is associated with overwhelming fear, helplessness, and the lasting emotional effects of threatening experiences, whereas disconnection refers to the disruption of an individual's relationship with themselves, other people, and their social environment. These categories explain how Charlie's childhood experiences affect his behavior and emotional development. The analysis examines selected scenes to explore these effects without treating them as a clinical diagnosis.

Terror

Herman (2015) explains that terror in traumatic experiences involves overwhelming fear and helplessness when an individual encounters a threat that exceeds their capacity to cope. Its psychological effects may persist beyond the original event, influencing emotional responses and making painful memories difficult to confront. In Charlie's case, terror is represented indirectly through his defensive reactions and emotional resistance when conversations approach his relationship with Aunt Helen. Rather than openly discussing his childhood experiences, Charlie initially responds with avoidance and dismissive language. These reactions suggest that the memories associated with his aunt remain emotionally difficult for him to process. Two scenes are particularly relevant because they reveal how references to Aunt Helen bring Charlie's unresolved experiences into the narrative.

In the first scene, Charlie and Sam discuss past relationships and personal experiences, leading Charlie to mention his aunt. The conversation takes place between 01:20:30 and 01:21:40, when Charlie states that Aunt Helen was his favorite person in the world before adding, "Until now." Although the dialogue does not explicitly explain his childhood trauma, the reference to Aunt Helen establishes an emotional connection between the present conversation and Charlie's past. His statement reveals the importance of his aunt in his life while also foreshadowing the painful memories associated with her. From Herman's (2015) perspective, this scene can be interpreted as an indirect indication of the persistence of traumatic memory, in which an apparently ordinary conversation evokes emotions connected to an unresolved experience. Nevertheless, the dialogue alone does not establish that Charlie is experiencing terror at that precise moment, its significance becomes clearer when considered alongside the later revelation of his childhood abuse. The scene therefore introduces the emotional complexity of Charlie's relationship with Aunt Helen and prepares the audience for the more explicit confrontation with his past.

A second manifestation appears during Charlie's therapy session with Dr. Burton,

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between 01:32:40 and 01:33:10. When Dr. Burton encourages him to confront his experiences, Charlie responds, "I don't care," before describing Aunt Helen as "insane." His short, dismissive statements contrast with the seriousness of the subject being discussed and indicate his reluctance to explore the memories associated with her. Rather than explaining his feelings or recounting what happened, Charlie attempts to end the discussion through emotional distancing. This response can be interpreted through Herman's (2015) account of the continuing psychological effects of trauma, particularly when confronting painful memories creates distress or a sense of vulnerability. The scene is significant because Charlie's avoidance does not resolve the underlying issue; instead, his reaction shows that the subject remains difficult for him to discuss. Considered alongside the earlier conversation with Sam, this moment suggests that Charlie's emotional resistance forms part of a broader pattern through which his unresolved childhood experiences continue to influence his present behavior.

Disconnection

Disconnection refers to the disruption of an individual's sense of belonging and ability to maintain meaningful relationships with others. Herman (2015) explains that traumatic experiences can undermine trust, emotional security, and interpersonal connections, leaving survivors feeling isolated from their social environment. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie's disconnection is evident in his limited social interactions, feelings of insecurity, and uncertainty about his place among his peers. Although his isolation is not sufficient by itself to establish a trauma-related condition, it becomes relevant when considered alongside his broader psychological struggles and the later revelation of his childhood abuse. The film establishes this pattern through Charlie's narration, which communicates his feelings of loneliness before he develops closer friendships. Two scenes show how his initial social isolation shapes his experience of adolescence.

The first scene occurs near the beginning of the film, between 00:02:33 and 00:02:37, when Charlie reflects on his circumstances through a voice-over narration. He describes himself as "the weird kid who spent time in the hospital" and admits, "I haven't really talked to anyone outside of my family all summer." These statements reveal that Charlie enters high school with limited social interaction and a negative perception of himself. His description of being a "weird kid" suggests that he anticipates being viewed differently by others, potentially making it more difficult for him to establish new relationships. In relation to Herman's (2015) concept of disconnection, the scene shows Charlie's feelings of separation from his peers and his limited sense of social belonging. His isolation is particularly significant because it establishes the emotional circumstances in which he begins his high school experience. The scene presents disconnection as a central aspect of Charlie's early characterization, although his limited social contact may also be influenced by factors beyond his traumatic experiences.

A second example appears between 00:03:12 and 00:03:18, when Charlie expresses the hope that his sister Candace and her boyfriend Derek will allow him to eat lunch with their Earth Club. His statement reveals that he is searching for a place where he can feel accepted, yet he does not appear to have established an independent social group. Instead, he considers joining a community through his sister's existing relationships. This dependence on an already established group highlights his uncertainty about how to initiate friendships and become part of the school environment. From Herman's (2015) perspective, the scene can be interpreted through the concept of disconnection because Charlie's desire for inclusion contrasts with his limited experience of social belonging. Nevertheless, the scene also shows that Charlie is interested in establishing relationships rather than completely rejecting social contact. His hope of joining the Earth Club suggests an underlying desire for connection that later becomes more visible through his friendships with Sam and Patrick.

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The Stages of Trauma Recovery Experienced by Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Trauma recovery involves more than the reduction of emotional distress because it also concerns the restoration of safety, the processing of painful experiences, and the development of meaningful relationships. Herman (2015) presents trauma recovery as a process involving five major stages or components such as a healing relationship, safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection, and commonality. These components describe how survivors may gradually regain control over their lives and rebuild their sense of identity. In the film, Charlie's recovery is represented through his relationships with friends, his interaction with Dr. Burton, and his eventual confrontation with the memories associated with Aunt Helen. This analysis focuses on three components such as healing relationship, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. These components are examined through selected scenes that show changes in Charlie's emotional awareness, willingness to confront his past, and capacity to establish meaningful relationships. The analysis treats recovery as a process represented through the film's narrative rather than as evidence that Charlie has completed every stage of a clinical recovery process.

Healing Relationship

Herman (2015) emphasizes that a supportive and trustworthy relationship can provide an essential foundation for trauma recovery. Through a healing relationship, survivors may begin to rebuild trust, experience emotional security, and communicate feelings that they previously found difficult to express. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie gradually develops relationships that offer acceptance and emotional support, particularly through his friendships with Sam and Patrick. These connections contrast with his earlier isolation and provide opportunities for him to participate more actively in social life. Although his friendships do not replace professional treatment, they show how supportive interpersonal relationships can contribute to a sense of belonging. Two conversations involving Sam show the importance of trust, mutual understanding, and emotional reassurance in Charlie's relationships.

The first scene occurs between 01:24:03 and 01:24:49, when Sam asks Charlie, "Why do I and everyone I love pick people who treat us like we're nothing?" Charlie responds, "We accept the love we think we deserve." The exchange shows that Sam feels comfortable discussing her personal difficulties with Charlie and that he responds with a thoughtful observation rather than dismissing her concerns. Their conversation creates space for emotional openness, allowing both characters to acknowledge vulnerabilities within their relationships. Through Herman's (2015) concept of a healing relationship, the scene shows how trust and mutual understanding can encourage individuals to reflect on their emotional experiences. Charlie's response also suggests that he can offer empathy and perspective despite the difficulties he faces in his own life. However, the dialogue primarily shows Charlie's capacity to participate in a supportive relationship rather than directly proving that his trauma has been resolved. Its significance lies in the development of an interpersonal connection that contrasts with the isolation presented at the beginning of the film.

A second example occurs between 01:40:05 and 01:41:00, when Sam expresses her concern for Charlie and tells him, "I just want to make sure that the first person who kisses you loves you." She subsequently tells Charlie, "I love you," and he responds, "I love you, too." The conversation communicates affection, reassurance, and recognition of Charlie's emotional worth. Sam's concern indicates that she wants Charlie to experience a relationship characterized by genuine care rather than emotional harm. According to Herman's (2015) framework, supportive relationships can help trauma survivors regain trust and develop a stronger sense of emotional security. In this scene, Charlie receives direct affirmation from someone whose friendship has become meaningful to him. The interaction therefore shows the importance of emotional acceptance in his recovery journey, particularly because his

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earlier experiences were marked by isolation and difficulties in processing painful memories.

Remembrance and Mourning

Remembrance and mourning involve confronting painful memories, acknowledging the experiences associated with them, and recognizing the emotions connected to past losses. Herman (2015) explains that trauma recovery requires survivors to address traumatic experiences that may previously have been avoided or difficult to integrate into their understanding of themselves. This process can involve intense emotional reactions because remembering the past may require individuals to acknowledge experiences that challenge their previous understanding of important relationships. In Charlie's case, this component becomes particularly evident during his conversations with Dr. Burton, when memories associated with Aunt Helen emerge more explicitly. The scenes reveal a transition from avoidance and denial toward recognition and verbal acknowledgment of childhood abuse. They are central to the analysis because they connect Charlie's earlier emotional difficulties with the traumatic experience that had remained unrecognized in his conscious understanding.

The first scene occurs between 01:36:45 and 01:37:10, when Dr. Burton encourages Charlie to recognize the nature of his relationship with Aunt Helen. As the conversation progresses, Charlie repeatedly responds, "No!" and eventually cries out, "No! No! No!" His repeated denial shows the intensity of his emotional reaction when confronted with information about his past. Rather than calmly accepting the discussion, he reacts with resistance, suggesting that the emerging memory is deeply distressing. In relation to Herman's (2015) concept of remembrance and mourning, this scene represents a confrontation with a painful reality that Charlie has struggled to acknowledge. His response shows that remembering trauma is not necessarily a straightforward process but may involve fear, denial, and emotional turmoil. Although the scene does not by itself show complete recovery, it marks a significant point in the narrative because Charlie can no longer maintain the same distance from the memories associated with Aunt Helen.

The second scene occurs between 01:38:00 and 01:38:35, when Charlie finally states, "Aunt Helen touched me. She used to touch me. And she said that if I told anyone, it would kill her." This disclosure identifies the childhood sexual abuse that had remained suppressed and helps explain the emotional difficulties depicted throughout the film. By verbalizing what happened, Charlie moves beyond his earlier dismissive responses and acknowledges the traumatic experience directly. Herman's (2015) framework emphasizes the importance of reconstructing and expressing traumatic experiences so that survivors can begin to understand their significance within their personal histories. Charlie's statement is therefore a important narrative moment because it connects his previously fragmented emotional responses with a specific traumatic experience. His disclosure also reveals the coercive burden he carried as a child, particularly the threat that telling someone would cause Aunt Helen's death.

Reconnection

Reconnection refers to the process through which trauma survivors rebuild their lives, develop meaningful relationships, and establish a sense of identity that is not entirely defined by traumatic experiences. Herman (2015) explains that recovery involves restoring social trust, discovering meaning, and engaging with life beyond the immediate effects of trauma. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie's reconnection is represented through his growing appreciation of friendship and his changing understanding of himself. His experiences with Sam, Patrick, and other supportive figures gradually challenge the isolation that characterized his early adolescence. Following his confrontation with the memories of Aunt Helen, Charlie begins to articulate a more hopeful perspective on his life and relationships. Two scenes show this change by showing how he acknowledges the support of others and begins to view his experiences as part of a larger personal story.

The first scene occurs between 01:38:31 and 01:39:10, when Charlie reflects on a

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meaningful moment shared with his friends. In his voice-over narration, he states, "This one moment when you know you're not a sad story. You are alive," before concluding, "And in this moment, I swear... we are infinite." These words contrast with his earlier descriptions of loneliness and his uncertainty about belonging. Rather than defining himself exclusively through emotional suffering, Charlie recognizes the value of being alive and sharing meaningful experiences with people he loves. Through Herman's (2015) concept of reconnection, this moment shows the development of a more positive self-perception and a renewed appreciation for interpersonal relationships. His description of himself as more than "a sad story" suggests that he is beginning to recognize an identity beyond his painful experiences. The scene therefore represents a movement toward reconnection because Charlie finds meaning in his relationships and experiences a stronger sense of belonging.

A second example appears in Charlie's final letter, delivered through voice-over narration between 01:36:02 and 01:37:20. Reflecting on his high school experience, he explains that he had been "in a bad place before I started high school" and acknowledges that the people around him helped him, adding, "You made me not feel alone." He also expresses the belief that his experiences will eventually become stories rather than remain the defining feature of his life. This reflection shows Charlie's recognition of the role that supportive relationships have played in changing his experience of isolation. From Herman's (2015) perspective, reconnection involves rebuilding trust, recognizing personal growth, and incorporating traumatic experiences into a broader understanding of life. Charlie's acknowledgment of his friends' influence suggests that he has developed a stronger appreciation of interpersonal support and his capacity to move forward. His statement that he no longer feels alone contrasts directly with his earlier admission that he had not spoken to anyone outside his family throughout the summer. Together, these moments show the development of social belonging and a more hopeful outlook, while leaving room for continued healing beyond the events shown in the film.

The findings show that Charlie's experiences of trauma and recovery are closely connected throughout *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Terror is represented through his emotional resistance when confronted with memories of Aunt Helen, while disconnection is reflected in his early social isolation and difficulty establishing a sense of belonging. The recovery analysis shows how supportive relationships, the disclosure of childhood abuse, and the development of a more positive self-perception contribute to Charlie's gradual movement toward reconnection. These findings are consistent with the interpretive framework provided by Herman (2015), particularly the emphasis on relationships, confronting traumatic memories, and rebuilding a meaningful life. Nevertheless, the film portrays recovery as a developing process rather than a complete or linear resolution of psychological distress. Charlie's story ultimately shows how acknowledging painful experiences and receiving support from others can help an individual begin to understand the past without allowing it to define the entirety of their identity.

CONCLUSION

Charlie experiences two forms of traumatic disorders discussed through Judith Herman's (2015) framework, namely Terror and Disconnection, in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012). Terror is reflected in his emotional distress, avoidance, and resistance when confronted with memories of his childhood abuse, while Disconnection is showd through his loneliness, social withdrawal, and difficulties establishing meaningful relationships. Regarding trauma recovery, the analysis identifies three stages in Charlie's journey: Healing Relationship, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection. His recovery begins through the acceptance and emotional support he receives from his friends, continues as he gradually confronts and acknowledges his traumatic memories, and progresses toward rebuilding his sense of identity

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and belonging. These stages show that psychological healing involves developing trust, processing painful experiences, and establishing meaningful relationships rather than simply eliminating emotional distress. The film portrays trauma as an experience that can influence an individual's emotional well-being, self-perception, and social relationships over time, while suggesting that supportive relationships and the willingness to confront painful memories can contribute to recovery. Charlie's journey shows that traumatic experiences remain part of his personal history but do not necessarily have to define his entire identity or prevent him from developing a more hopeful outlook on life.

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