

Testimonial from a 48-year old woman referred from an agency serving clients impacted by sexual assault and domestic violence, and a community health center. It was received on March 7, 2018, after the client had completed the 5-week Healing Workshop in late December 2017 (10-hours) and participated in 7-weeks of Healing Support Group meetings (14-hours). She summarizes how her Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) impacted her and how she found her way to healing.

I was referred to the Healing Workshop by my therapist after I told her I felt like I was broken and didn't care much about life or relationships anymore. My heart just hurt and although I behaved respectfully and kindly toward other people, that's not how I behaved toward myself. I filled my body with drugs every day just to dull the pain. I had been in a cycle of shame, guilt, and self-blame since I was eight years old, when my mother left home with my sister and my "father" began to treat me as if I were his wife. I never knew my biological father. Once my mother had gone, my father's behavior escalated from inappropriate touch to something much worse. He had been sexually abusing me for as long as I could remember—at least since three or four years old. Over the next 40 years, I created a shell around myself and would no longer allow things to hurt me too much.

Historically I had never learned to cope. I learned how to keep secrets and cover up my fear and pain. By age 11, I was drinking, smoking pot by 14, and using cocaine, LSD and Mescaline on a regular basis by 16. It was the only way I could survive. I attempted suicide by overdosing multiple times, the first when I was fifteen after disclosing to my parents that I had been repeatedly sexually assaulted by a family member in whose care they had entrusted me. They blamed me and "my mistakes." I was not allowed back in my father's home when I was discharged from rehab, so I ended up on my own.

Overdosing and attempting suicide would become a recurring theme in my life. I had been admitted to a few rehabs over the years and had spent time in psychiatric units, diagnosed with PTSD, bi-polar disorder, and labeled as a drug addict. I was prescribed suboxone. The doctor told me I was going to be on this drug for the rest of my life. And it messed up my brain, so I stopped taking it. The same drug companies that pushed opioids are now pushing this as the remedy. At one point, I had a very bad experience with an "AA sponsor" and relapsed. Overall, my healthcare and drug treatment has cost insurance companies at least \$200,000.

I felt betrayed by everyone who claimed to "want to help in my recovery." I had been told I was "treatment resistant," which proved to me I would be sick forever; sick in my heart, sick in my soul, and sick in my body. I would never be declared healed, and I would never be given my power back.

When I met my therapist in October of 2017, I felt shattered. I'd just been discharged from the hospital after a ten-day stay, where I had voluntarily admitted myself. On the day I went to the hospital, I had pleaded with my husband to bring me for help. He refused, telling me I was pathetic and that we all had problems. I was told to get over myself. I wondered if I could find a reason to live.

My husband had become progressively mean and violent toward me over the years, which would cause me to visit the emergency room on several occasions. Looking back, there was no reason to expect that my husband would help me in any way. Why would he want to see me get treatment? My mother was unusually attentive that day and would not stop calling until I agreed to ask for a ride to the hospital. A friend brought me to the emergency room.

I spent 10 days in the hospital in complete turmoil. I didn't know what to do or where to turn. After my husband visited the first time, the staff began turning him away due to the impact his visit had on me.

This is when I started to get honest about what had been happening at home. When the time came to begin discharge planning, the staff referred me to a safe shelter who took me in and started to teach me the things I never knew, and referred me to other agencies that could help, like the local community health center and local recovery center. I began a journey of healing and education.

The shell I'd created when I was young now felt encircled by trenches and barbed wire. I didn't want to engage with anyone really. I just wanted to learn how to get through the day from inside my protective coating. I decided to try holding on and at least keep myself clean of drugs.

And then...

I recall meeting Frank and Stephanie in mid-November; for the first time in a very long time, I cried. I cried because I saw two people in front of me that had truly trudged through the fire and agony of loss and trauma and made it to the other side. They were not unscathed; some things never go away altogether (nor should we wish for them to), but they were beautiful people who shine from within. The first time I saw them express emotion, my hard candy shell was broken, and I cried with them and for them.

The Healing Workshop has educated me in the ways that trauma changes us and that we have the power to rewire our brains. To hear someone tell me 'I was a good person' and 'it wasn't my fault' seems like such a simple thing, but it was the simple thing I needed to hear. Processing those words, giving them meaning, allowed me to open to the healing message that is so lovingly given in this workshop. I have come to see myself as a person capable of giving and receiving love, of proudly letting my scars show and my wounds heal now that I no longer flagellate and punish myself for the things that were done TO me.

I learned about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and filled out the ACEs survey. I scored a 9 out of 10. With ACEs, you grow up not knowing that safety is even possible, and not knowing that a consistent loving presence is even possible.

The best way to explain what happened to me is that the shame, guilt, and embarrassment are slowly being lifted and replaced with increasing confidence and a healthier attitude toward my insecurities in life. I've learned that I am not fundamentally flawed, but rather that I am still "perfectly imperfect," as Frank says. I recently stopped taking pain medication and muscle relaxants and feel that I am no longer at risk of losing my sobriety.

The first time Frank got up close, looked me in the eyes and said, "it's not your fault, you're a good person," I wasn't certain I believed him, but I definitely do now. Frank and Stephanie have found a way to reach those of us who are stuck in our pain and are unable to find peace through other resources.

After their five-week workshop and several more weeks of their support group, I feel joy again, I feel love again, I feel worthy again. I know I have the resources inside to heal and create a life worth living.

Thank you, Frank and Stephanie, for giving me my life back.