

#MeToo? / It's Not Your Fault / Start Healing

The #MeToo movement has helped many survivors find their voice, but the truth remains that most survivors are struggling in secret. [Statistics on sexual assault](#) tell us that over two-thirds go unreported. Likewise, most incidents of domestic violence and child abuse are never reported.

Why are these crimes kept in secret? Because they often leave the victim feeling broken and ashamed, and revealing them would only risk blame and rejection (that is, more pain). Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, a leading researcher on trauma and author of the book, [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#), states that after traumatic experiences, “... shame becomes the dominant emotion and hiding the truth the central preoccupation.”



It's no surprise, then, that the vast majority of survivors struggle in secret. But how can we help them when we don't know? I've struggled myself with this question since my daughter Katlyn took her own life in 2014, after experiencing sexual assault and before I had learned about her secret. Holding these traumatic experiences in secret can have horrible consequences. Even when the trauma occurred long ago, research shows that the negative effects most often remain. Since most survivors are not able to come forward, the only way to connect with them and give them hope is by raising public awareness about the prevalence of trauma, its health effects, and the conditions needed to start healing.

The largest study ever on trauma, called the [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) study](#), was conducted by the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente in the late 1990s on over 17,000 patients and has since been repeated on over 440,000. The study asked patients if they had experienced ten different types of childhood adversity/trauma, such as sexual, physical or emotional abuse, and totaled an ACE score from 0 to 10 for each patient.

The surprising results showed that two-thirds of patients had experienced one or more types of childhood adversity and that most major public health problems, such as depression, addiction, obesity, heart disease and cancer, increased directly with increasing ACE score. For example, at an ACE score of 4 or more, patients were twice as likely to smoke, 7-times more likely to be an alcoholic, 10-times more likely to inject drugs, and 12-times more likely to attempt suicide.

While the ACE study demonstrates how common and damaging childhood trauma can be, research on shame and empathy leads us to the most important words trauma survivors need to hear to start healing: “*You're not alone.*” Brené Brown, a research professor and best-selling author who studies shame and empathy states, in a [2013 interview with Oprah Winfrey](#), that shame needs three things to grow exponentially – “*secrecy, silence, and judgment.*” Brown goes on to say that the antidote to shame is empathy, “*It cannot survive being spoken and being met with empathy.*” In her popular [video on empathy](#), Brown says when someone is in a deep hole and they shout out from the bottom and say, “*I'm stuck. It's dark. I'm overwhelmed,*” empathy is when we climb down and say, “*I know what it's like down here and you're not alone.*”

In a recent [60 Minutes segment on Trauma-Informed Care](#), hosted by Oprah Winfrey, who herself is a childhood trauma survivor, she tells us another important thing that trauma survivors need to hear is the question, *“What happened to you?”* We need to stop asking, *“What’s wrong with you?”* because the ACEs study tells us that these traumatic experiences and the terrible emotional effects that follow are not the victim’s fault, though they are so often blamed and shamed by others. Asking the question, *“What happened to you?”* helps us stay out of judgment and lets the survivor know, *“It’s not your fault.”*

In the *60 Minutes* segment, Oprah asks Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading expert on childhood trauma, what’s the difference in being able to overcome traumatic experiences versus not being able to. Dr. Perry says the answer comes down to something simple: *“relationships.”* But in a [follow-up interview on 60 Minutes Overtime](#), Winfrey cuts to the heart of the matter, *“What he really means is love. He’s a scientist. He’s not going to use the word ‘love.’ But it really is about how you are responded to, valued, trusted and loved by those around you.”* So in the simplest terms, if you want to help survivors heal, love and empathy is the place to start.

If you are a survivor who has struggled in secret with childhood or adult trauma, please know that;

- *“You’re not alone.”*
- There’s a cause for your suffering and *“It’s not your fault.”*
- The intense pain and emotions you feel *“are normal,”* given what you’ve experienced, and
- *“Healing is also normal,”* with loving support, understanding and care.

Over the past year, we’ve had success using these same principles to help survivors in our [Healing Workshops](#). One recent participant said that after 30 years of struggling with anger and addiction, *“Something just lifted. I realized it wasn’t me. It was my trauma.”*

If you’re interested in starting your own healing journey, please visit our website, [Katlyn’s Healing Center](#), where we offer a Start Healing Presentation along with other helpful resources. You could also sign up for our free online Healing Support Program to help guide you through our healing resources and answer any questions you may have about the materials.

If you have a family member or friend who may be struggling in secret, please forward this information to them and offer them love and empathy as best you can. With your caring efforts and our healing resources, we can help give them hope for a better day. One thing I have learned, when survivors feel hopeless and disconnected, they may leave this world or try. If I had known about my Katlyn’s trauma sooner, I would have held her close and never let go until she was better. There are so many “Katlyns” [and “Kens”] out there struggling in secret. In honor of my little angel, I ask that you help find them and support them in safely bringing their secrets into the light, where they can release their shame and begin the healing they so desperately need and deserve.

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For Immediate Assistance:

Contact your local support center, which you can find through [RAINN’s Get Help](#) web page, or you can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233.