

# Days of Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God to hurting kids in a gentle way*

## FACING THE PAIN

By Jon Wells

*Trauma Informed Care.* In the facilities we serve, this approach to working with kids is making big waves. At its core, trauma informed care seeks to recognize that serious trauma has been suffered by these youth. This becomes the starting point for understanding and helping each child. I have benefitted enormously from trainings that I have been able to attend on-site at different facilities. I am learning more about how trauma affects brain development and behavior. The experts are unpacking the implications of overactive limbic system responses and frontal lobe shutdown associated with the lingering effects of traumatic experiences.

Think of it this way. If a grizzly bear started chasing you through the woods, you would not be occupying yourself with differential equations. You would be running like crazy! Your heart rate and respiration rate would spike. Your system would be flooded with endorphins, cortisol, and adrenaline. Your veins and arteries would work in concert to move blood from your extremities to your core. And the frontal lobes of your brain would go dark. The part of your brain responsible for logic, prediction, problem solving, and higher functions would give way to your lower brain. Advanced brain scans are shedding light on how this 'fight or flight' response is hardwired into the lower regions of the brain. Once activated, it is often hard to stop hyperventilating or shaking. Memory and language centers shut down. Survival becomes the sole focus. The kids we see in residential care have hyper-responsive limbic systems, ready at the drop of a hat to escalate. This is one of the lingering effects of trauma.

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PO BOX 12  
St. James, MO 65559  
573.578.3259

**Program Director**  
**Jon Wells**  
jon@daysofhope.net

**Chaplain**  
**Aaron Jeffers**  
aaron@daysofhope.net

**Treasurer**  
**Jo Ann Davidson**  
joann@daysofhope.net



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**www.daysofhope.net**

The spectrum of wounding that these children have suffered is extensive. Grieving the death of a parent or sibling. . . watching that loved one die, sometimes in violent ways. . . having a parent removed from your life and placed in prison. . . the deep violation of physical abuse . . . sexual abuse . . . mental and very personal verbal abuse . . . being abandoned and left to fend for yourself . . . being locked in a closet or a basement . . . being starved . . . scalded with hot water . . . burned with cigarettes . . . The list seems to never end. Did you know that the brain of a traumatized child is structurally and functionally different from the brain of a child who lives in a secure environment? As I learn more about brain science and behavioral interventions, my own mind wanders to the theological implications of trauma on the human soul.

My first observation is a simple one. As John Eldgridge says, 'our hearts were not made for this brutal place.' We were not designed for trauma. Adam and Eve were made for Eden. Death was not a part of that design. Neither was rape, or hateful action, or jealous rage, or violence. We were formed in the image and likeness of the Creator, and given good hearts. But with sin came the fall, and with the fall a tidal wave of trauma washed across humanity. Adam and Eve had two sons; one killed the other. And every generation since has suffered very personally the impact of trauma. Now we, the image bearers of the Creator, inherit that same broken world. No wonder we are at a loss to address the evil that seems to rise from every corner of our planet.

Is it any wonder that the first stage of grief is denial? When we lose a spouse or a child, the human heart

universally reacts in the same way every time:

"This did not happen."

We simply are not equipped to metabolize the ugly reality of death. In Eden there was not a category for death- it was not part of the design. And so we are left to our own devices, trying to deal with things which we are not equipped to manage. The responses of kids in residential care illuminate

this reality.

**It's no big deal.**

You would think that a child who has suffered so much would be deeply aware of the impact of trauma on their lives. You might be surprised to learn that most of these kids minimize their experiences. They often dismiss the pain with a shrug.

"It is in the past, I need to move on."

"There is nothing I can do about it now."

"Bad stuff happens to lots of people, it's just a part of life."

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.*

*-Isaiah 61*

"I don't like to talk about it."

Like a child who cleans his room by shoving the mess into his closet, we seem to believe that we can ignore the residual effects of trauma on our daily functioning. When the closet doors give way and the ugliness comes tumbling out, these kids often just recover and sweep it up into the closet again. Some seek out strategies to lock the closet up so they can avoid another messy explosion. But each one will eventually learn the hard way that her refusal to acknowledge the effect of trauma on her life does not keep that trauma from poisoning her world.

**Trauma is my looking glass.**

Another observation about trauma is that those who suffer allow their trauma to become the filter through which they interpret the world. The pain of the wound is so loud,

*Facing the Pain continued . . .*

so immense that it dominates the thinking of a traumatized individual; every part of their universe becomes stained by it.

*What is the role of a parent? What is God like? Who am I? Can I trust other people?* Place yourself in the shoes of the little girl who was prostituted out by her mother to earn drugs, and try to answer those questions. When a child interprets the universe through the lens of their own trauma, God becomes a heartless villain, the child becomes a worthless piece of garbage, and other people become dangerous liars. Without intervention, such a life is destined for tragedy.

### **Triggers**

Every story of pain is unique. Each child carries with them specific triggers related to their experiences. Perhaps it is a domineering man who sets them off. Perhaps it is being laughed at. Children who have been locked away cannot bear the threat of isolation. Whatever the trigger, when that button is pushed, the child shifts into a totally different mode. As described above, the child loses the ability to work through a situation by communicating and problem solving. They resort to much uglier survival skills.

### **God's Response to Trauma**

The heartbeat of the Gospel centers around God's response to the trauma we have suffered. In the fourth chapter of his book, Luke tells us that Jesus returned to Nazareth after being tempted in the wilderness. He walked to the familiar confines of the local synagogue He had attended as a child, and launched His ministry with the reading of the prophet Isaiah. His commentary of this passage was brief and profound.

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

# When I See You Again

*By Aaron Jeffers*

Many pastors find it hard to do ministry close to a military base because they get attached to their flock, and then Uncle Sam whisks them off to a different deployment. Just the time you get in a leadership groove and have the opportunity to serve with them, they usually have to go. This is frustrating and pretty rough on the heart strings of a shepherd. In this ministry, we experience the opposite. You hope the kids go home to a better life and that everything is A-OK. We find ourselves hoping not to see these kids return to treatment.

There was a child that we worked with for a year who was very suicidal, and I remember the celebration when they finally were able to go home. Six-months later, I saw them pop-up in residential again.

I asked, "What's up? It's good to see you again, but...kind of bittersweet. What happened?"

The response was sobering. "I took an entire bottle of pills." This child went on to describe permanent physical and mental deficits that have resulted from the overdose.

I replied, "Not to pry, but why do you keep trying to commit suicide?" I have learned that it's just a matter of time until they're successful in their attempt, unless they receive God's healing.

The reply: "It's the pain. The pain of what happened to me is always right there."

One of the big dangers of this ministry is a form secondary trauma where I think, 'Man, she looks just like my daughter,' or, 'That kid could be my son.' And then I imprint and import the emotions that I feel from being a parent into this kid's experience. It can really mess with a person. As hard as it is for me to deal with secondary trauma, many of these youth are dealing with a secondary residential placement. It's rarely a good situation, but as hard as it seems, it's usually better than the other options.

I think our responsibility and response is to pray for these kids. Pray that the cycle of pain gets broken, healed, and then restored. These kids are dealing with wounds in full emotional surround sound with a horrific HD screensaver of the past flashing in the background of their mind.

Some might say, "Just tell them to invite Jesus into their heart and they'll be okay." But breaking through that crust that forms on the heart after abuse makes it hard for a kid to invite Jesus into their pain (because they think God may have caused it, and/or let it happen). No matter how hard we try, we can't outsource the Holy Spirit in a persons' life.

The bright side of seeing a kid pop up in residential is that we get another chance to show them the love of God. Setbacks and returns to residential can be veiled stepping stones to helping a child find their foundation in the heart of God.

*Facing the Pain continued . . .*

Isaiah revealed the heart of God when he announced the rescue of the poor and brokenhearted. This tender desire for restoration stands in stark contrast to the ways that religious folks sometimes respond to the many pains we suffer.

“You just don’t have enough faith.”

“You need the joy of the Lord to be your strength.”

Such responses often add insult to injury. More importantly, they do not reflect the heart of a loving Heavenly Father who desires deep healing in broken places. Papering over jagged wounds with fancy religious catchphrases is not God’s response to his hurting children.

### **Us vs. Them**

For some reason we seem to want to perpetuate an ‘us vs. them’ mentality. Even as you read this article, notice how easy it is to put these kids into a category and feel sorry for them. They are the poor little abused kids and we are the intact, functional ones. But let me be clear- everyone that lives on planet earth suffers trauma at some point in their story.

You are not exempt from the realities of the fall. All of us have suffered some form of violence. Perhaps your trauma looks different than theirs. You might argue that your experiences were less severe. But I am learning that there are no exceptions in the human race.

Every story has a dark chapter, every life has a crime scene. Every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve has inherited a legacy of trauma.

Like these kids, we rush in to minimize the impact of old pains. We deny that they even exist.

“That was a long time ago . . . They had good intentions. . . I just need to be tough and get over it.”

“I’m living in victory.”

If you would let me, I would simply ask you a few questions.

1. If you had permission to tell your story, could you describe the trauma have you suffered *without making excuses or minimizing it*? What does the crime scene look like? If you gave yourself permission to investigate, could you ask God to explore it with you? Could you journal and put the story on paper?
2. Are there ways in which you have used this trauma to interpret the world around you? Have you allowed your story of pain to inform you about God or affect the way you see yourself?
3. Are there circumstances when you are triggered by old wounds and you struggle to maintain composure?

**Engage! Invite God and safe people into these broken spaces– He desires a process of healing for every wound!**