

HEALING



MAGAZINE

2019 Vol. 24, No. 2

# *Pets, Animals and Nature*

*Helping people  
heal and thrive*

## **Plus:**

- Stressful job? Find an OASIS
- Helping kids sleep better
- What teachers should know about childhood trauma



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#### KidsPeace

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#### About KidsPeace

KidsPeace is a private charity dedicated to serving the behavioral and mental health needs of children, preadolescents and teens. Founded in 1882, KidsPeace provides a unique psychiatric hospital, a comprehensive range of residential treatment programs, accredited educational services and a variety of foster care and community programs to give hope, help and healing to children, adults and those who love them. Learn more at [www.kidspeace.org](http://www.kidspeace.org).

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Providing practical, clinical information to families and children's professionals



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### Are you interested in writing for Healing Magazine?

If you are a professional in the field of mental health, education or parenting, we welcome your submission. *Healing* articles should be about 1,200 words and consist of practical, clinical information about children's mental health that can be applied in the home, classroom, community and/or office setting.

Ideas for articles can be sent to [healing@kidspeace.org](mailto:healing@kidspeace.org). *Healing Magazine* reserves the right to edit all manuscripts.





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#### Dear Friends of KidsPeace,

In recent studies two-thirds of American households say they own a pet – evidence of the incredible bond people can form with the animals that share their lives. In this issue of *Healing Magazine*, we look at the *therapeutic benefits of pets, animals and nature* for individuals facing mental and behavioral health challenges:

- A pet shelter in Georgia gives kids in a residential treatment program the chance to find unexpected common ground with animals in need of care.
- Programs in Pennsylvania and Georgia are using the unique experience of working with horses to teach troubled people empathy and kindness, not just to the animals but to themselves and their neighbors.
- A program teaching science via the natural world is recast as a tool to unlock social-emotional learning potential among at-risk elementary school students.
- We learn what it takes to become a certified therapy dog from an enthusiastic four-legged correspondent named S'Morris, and we bring you the inspirational story of Old Man Fred, an abandoned pet who taught the woman who cared for him at the end of his days an essential lesson on how to live.

As always, this edition of *Healing Magazine* offers a wide range of other perspectives – from what teachers should know about dealing with students who have experienced trauma to ways organizations can help their employees who also are dealing with stress and anxiety in their jobs, from the importance of sleep and mindful listening to the possible links between food allergies and childhood anxiety.

Our goal with *Healing Magazine* is to provide our readers with the best information on how parents, educators and children's professionals can help our kids thrive and succeed in their journey to adulthood and beyond. An important part of that effort is hearing your perspectives, so please share what you think about the subjects we cover – or should cover – by emailing us at [healing@kidspeace.org](mailto:healing@kidspeace.org).

And I want to note a significant advancement at [www.healingmagazine.org](http://www.healingmagazine.org): our redesigned site now lets you select, print or share **individual stories** from current and past issues! We are excited at this new capability to bring insights and inspiration to even more people, so please feel free to share the articles on social media and among your friends and colleagues.

Enjoy this issue of *Healing Magazine*, and thank you for your support of KidsPeace!

Michael Slack  
President/CEO

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# OASIS SPACE:



## In the Eye of the Storm

By Jodi Whitcomb

**According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and a 2014 Gallup poll, the average American works more than 40 hours a week - and in many cases, more than 50 hours a week.**

In an article titled *"The US is the Most Overworked Country in the World"* by G.E. Miller of 20-Something Finance we read about several shocking realities. He quotes the Center for American Progress on the topic of work and family life balance: *"In 1960, only 20 percent of mothers worked [outside the home]. Today, 70 percent of American children live in households where all adults are employed."* The author goes on to paint a jolting picture of the American worker's experience compared to workers in other countries:

- Over 100 countries have laws that limit the length of a work week; the U.S. does not.
- According to the ILO, "Americans work 137 more hours per year than Japanese workers, 260 more hours per year than British workers, and 499 more hours per year than French workers."

- Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics infers that American workers have increased their productivity by about 400% since 1950.

Just reading about these facts could make anyone tired! Let's take this picture and superimpose it over the life of an American worker in the field of healthcare. What we find is something even more concerning than a simple lack of work-life balance: the American Public Health Association cites growing prevalence of burnout among health care professionals. The jobs are demanding and highly stressful. Life-and-death situations are part of the everyday work routine. In addition to burnout we see healthcare workers suffering compassion fatigue and in some cases, vicarious trauma. There is a growing body of research about these phenomena, and with good reason; the more we understand

about how these conditions develop and what we can do to manage and prevent them, the better off our workers will be.

KidsPeace recognizes the risk associated with a burned-out, fatigued and traumatized workforce. In the fall of 2018 the leaders of the KidsPeace Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) were racking our brains for a solution to a problem. We had repeated requests to provide support to staff who were experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, but the methods we were using at that time did not lend themselves well to these issues. We were used to helping staff debrief single traumatizing events, but not so much experience with chronic exposure to stress.

As they say, "necessity breeds invention," and so it did!



The CIRT leaders developed a completely mobile program; a veritable café of relaxation activities that could be deployed to stressed out staff quickly and efficiently. The program, now known as “OASIS SPACE,” consists of 12-15 separate relaxation activities and exercises that target different preferences and interests. Some examples: mandala coloring, water painting, aromatherapy, sound therapy, trauma-informed yoga mini-sessions, animal therapy, a garden box, magnetic sculptures, squishy items, diamond art, puzzles and much more. The space is set up in under 30 minutes in a room near where the staff are working. It is facilitated by members of the KidsPeace Critical Incident Response Team who are then available to talk if needed. After spending about 45 minutes trying different strategies the participants are provided with materials that provide guidance for ongoing wellness and they are referred to KidsPeace’s Employee Assistance Program for further support when needed.



Some OASIS SPACE activities

Surveys taken by participants at the end of OASIS SPACE sessions show a unanimous support for continuing the program and expanding it. Associates have told us that attending OASIS SPACE has made the rest of their day calmer. We hear that our staff members find the program relaxing and enjoyable. Many of them implement the strategies in their lives as a way to cope with chronic stressful scenarios in the workplace. Supervisors have caught on and are creating mini-OASIS areas in their work areas, or providing bins of supplies at staff meetings. All in all, it seems that having OASIS SPACE at KidsPeace has been a real benefit to our associates.

## SELF-CARE BASICS

You may be surprised to understand what all is involved in good self-care. Many people really think of self-care as going to the spa or lighting candles, and it’s so much more than that. It’s looking at your whole life, your whole self, and making intentional decisions in favor of preserving yourself in all areas. Think about the following categories of self-care:

1. Appropriate attention to life relationships
2. Intimacy / intimate relationships
3. General pacing of life activities
4. Setting and maintaining limits for yourself
5. Healthy sleep habits
6. Well-rounded nutrition
7. Attention to hygiene and outward appearance
8. Maintenance of general physical health (regular wellness appointments – eyes, teeth, regular bloodwork, prevention, taking medications, etc.)
9. Attention to mental health
10. Providing yourself a time for recreation, hobbies and leisure
11. Attention to physical fitness / regular physical activity

12. Maintenance of finances / financial planning for the future
13. Regular care of home and vehicle
14. Organization and cleanliness of your environment at home, work, vehicle, etc.
15. Attention to faith/spirituality and faith/spiritual matters/connection to a faith/spiritual community
16. Attention to learning and healthy professional development

Self-care is engaging in self-preservation. It’s engaging in strategies that protect our own well-being and happiness. It’s an intentional activity designed to care for our mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health.

For those of us whose whole workday revolves around caring for others this is essential. We cannot care for others if we are not caring for ourselves. ◀

*Are you interested in learning more about the KidsPeace Critical Incident Response Team and OASIS SPACE? KidsPeace offers training and consultation and we’d be happy to talk with you more! Please contact Jodi Whitcomb, KidsPeace’s CIRT Agency Coordinator for more information - [Jodi.Whitcomb@kidspeace.org](mailto:Jodi.Whitcomb@kidspeace.org).*



*Jodi Whitcomb, Director of Organizational Development and Training for KidsPeace, has 25 years of experience working in children’s mental and behavioral health. Jodi is also the leader of the KidsPeace Critical Incident Response Team, and in that role has responded to more than sixty traumatic events, offering help to KidsPeace associates and individuals in the surrounding community. She has also provided training in crisis response and spoken on the topic regionally, nationally and online. Jodi holds a Masters of Counseling Psychology and has completed comprehensive exams in a general psychology doctoral program.*

**Check out the Self-Care Journal Exercise on page 28**





*Special  
Focus:*



*Pets,  
Animals*



*and Nature  
as therapeutic tools*





# Animal-Assisted Therapy with Shelter Dogs

By Laura Clawson

Most people I know would agree: Animals are amazing! The benefits of human/animal interactions have been widely acknowledged throughout the world. Studies have been done to document the many benefits related to stress, social interactions and social behavior, and limited evidence suggests additional benefits to immune system response and pain management. As a professional dog trainer, I see these benefits in my clients every day, and I wanted to use my education, skills, and love for dogs and people to help make a difference in our community. A program utilizing animal-assisted therapy seemed like a perfect fit for the children of KidsPeace.

Armed with information and knowledge of needs at both our local animal shelter and our local KidsPeace chapter, I approached Louis Shagawat, Executive Director of KidsPeace's Bowdon Campus (GA), in the spring of 2016. We met to discuss the possibilities of a program to benefit the children at the campus, as well as to benefit the animals at our Carroll County Animal Shelter. I presented a six-week program that focused on teaching the kids how to safely interact with the animals, while teaching the animals beneficial skills to help them get adopted.

By October 2016 our program became a reality, and the first group of girls from KidsPeace met me at the shelter, along with their counselor and an additional staff member. Teaching them how to interact safely with the animals involves discussions on trust, mutual respect, empathy, body language, and communication. Our program meets at the shelter for one hour per week for six weeks. During this time, the kids are able to interact with the animals as we make observations about

behavior, and together make decisions on what skills might be most helpful to getting the animal adopted.

After each meeting at the shelter, the children return to the KidsPeace campus and meet in a group with their counselor. The group discussions include topics that come up based on what happens at the shelter. While I am not privy to the specifics, I do know that the kids are amazed at the similarities between their feelings and experiences and those of many of the animals at the shelter.

During each six-week cycle, I make sure to watch the kids begin – some with reservations, some with an abundance of confidence, and some with little to no observable emotion. Over the course of the six weeks, I watch each of them learn about animal behavior, including nonverbal communication. They gain valuable communication and life skills, and become eager to help the next animal.

I see them show restraint when they want to pet an animal, but see that animal is not comfortable. I see them start to empathize when a dog doesn't want to go back into the kennel area after a visit, or when an animal behaves awkwardly or only wants to sit in a lap to receive affection. I see them truly learn about human-animal bonds, and begin to give affection and help one another when someone is not sure what to do or how to behave.

At the end of our one-hour visit to the shelter on week six of the program, I ask the kids to write a letter of gratitude to the animals, to the shelter staff, to another member of the group, or to anyone involved in making the program possible. I ask them to share their letters with the group. Hearing these notes of gratitude read out loud has reduced me to tears on many occasions. When these young people thank the dogs and share that they know how it feels to be left behind, to be tossed away, to feel hopeless, and

*(Continued on page 28)*





# Healing

## Equine-Assisted Therapy

By Sandra Floyd



*19 years ago my husband Buddy and I and our family began an adventure that turned into a love story.*

**W**e had two daughters at the time who wanted to compete in barrel racing on their horses. We went to several events in our area and decided we wanted a more family-friendly place for our children to compete. So in August 2000 we built Possum Snout Arena. And sure enough, families started coming to our Fun Shows.

One of those families was Kay and Bobby Smith, their two sons Ben and Sam, and an amazing 10-year-old daughter, Rachel. Rachel was born with spina bifida; she had no use of her body from the waist down. Ben and Sam rode in our Fun Shows and demonstrated their cowboy abilities with great ease. Rachel, on the other hand, sat at the corner of the arena in her wheelchair with her cowgirl boots and cowgirl hat and cheered everyone on.

One day after a show, my husband asked Rachel what she thought about it, and her response still brings tears to my eyes:

***“I just wish I could be like everyone else and ride in this show.”***

Enough said. Buddy asked her parents’ permission to teach her how to ride, and the love story begins. It was God’s 2x4 across our hard heads that we had built this arena for more than just our daughters and regular families. We built this arena for those less fortunate than ourselves.

That same year, Jeff Fishman brought his daughter to ride in our shows. Jeff was a Behavioral Therapist for youth and adolescents at a local hospital, and we conspired together to create an Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) program for these clients. EAT is designed to help people with psychological, physical, or substance abuse issues.

The goal of our 6-week “Break the Cycle” program is a trail ride – but the REAL ultimate goal is for the participants to begin to unravel and dig deep into the issues they are dealing with. There’s no better way to accomplish this than with a loyal, loving and trustworthy horse that can genuinely demonstrate unconditional love to a child that may feel so undeserving of this kind of love.

*(Continued on page 12)*



# Through Horses

## The amazing power of partnership

By Cheryl Baker

SF



Lily's world was confusing. Adopted by her grandparents at age 3, she struggled for many years after being diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She fought taking her medication, or she just forgot to take it. She had issues in school; establishing healthy relationships and keeping up with her schoolwork and responsibilities was a lot on her plate, and she frequently fell short. It was not uncommon for her to be given detention, and even worse, sometimes expelled from school. Her grandparents struggled to help her succeed, but all the interventions they tried were ineffective.

Then, they discovered *Equi-librium*.

*Equi-librium* is a therapeutic horsemanship center located in Nazareth, PA. Nearly 100 participants visit the center weekly for their 45-minute session of "healing through horses."

Why horses? Buck Brannaman, a leading practitioner of horse handling, explains it like this: "*The horse is a mirror to your soul. Sometimes you might not like what you see. Sometimes you will.*" Horses sense a person's anxiety levels, and they react accordingly. If you are nervous when approaching a horse, the horse will sense that and be nervous and skittish under your lead. If you are calm, firm, and gentle, the horse will know it can relax

and work in partnership with you. By studying horse behavior and by observing the reactions of a horse based on certain stimuli, individuals can learn a lot about their own reactions to situations around them.

According to the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, the experiential approach in an "equine-assisted learning" setting integrates equine-human interaction into a planned learning experience to meet the identified goals or desires of the participant(s). Working with horses provides opportunities to teach critical life skills such as trust, respect, honesty, and communication.

Horses ask people to be aware of their surroundings at all times; through interactions with horses, participants learn a heightened sense of self-awareness. This is important in order to reveal patterns of behavior and gives participants the opportunity to think in a new way. Furthermore, participants gain self-esteem and self-confidence while learning how to work with such a large and powerful creature. *Equi-librium's* on-staff certified Equine Specialist in Mental Health Learning works with a licensed therapist to offer a therapeutic partnership aimed at achieving the participant's personal goals – with the horse acting as a co-therapist.

(Continued on page 12)



(Continued from page 10: Riding Towards Healing)

Breathing in rhythm with the horse, or smelling the horse's neck while taking deep breaths, can calm an anxiety attack in seconds. And remembering that feeling during a real-life situation can defuse a crisis before it erupts. We introduce *partnering* with a horse as opposed to *controlling* a horse, as the child may have been controlled by a predator themselves.

Horses are large and powerful animals that can be very intimidating to an inexperienced participant. And the arena in which we work is outdoors and has dirt and horse poop, which can trigger high levels of discomfort and uncertainty. This all disappears as the kids help the horse understand what is wanted and be willing to do it.

Horses also have their very own personalities and they bond with kids with similar personalities. Stubborn Sunny will most likely bond with a kid with a stubborn nature. Cool and calm Blue will bond with a kid that is also cool and calm. Rider is the "alpha horse" - he looks for the leaders of the pack. There is nothing more therapeutic than your horse greeting you with a nuzzle and tail swish.

Ten years ago, a young cowboy came to one of our horse shows. He loved the environment, and talked with his boss at KidsPeace in Bowdon, GA. An agreement was reached to bring kids that demonstrated improved behaviors to participate in what is now Rachel's Wish Foundation at Possum Snout Arena.

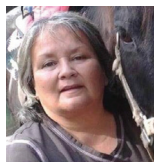
The relationship between Rachel's Wish Foundation and KidsPeace has grown due to their willingness to step outside of the box and try innovative ideas to help their clients. This relationship isn't just a business arrangement; it is a partnership designed to empower kids in their treatment programs, and a partnership to introduce KidsPeace kids to the community as positive, trustworthy and responsible members of their community.

*And the love story grows...*

Rachel's Wish Foundation hosts the "It's All About Me Games" for our Special Needs community. This past year we asked Terri Nixon at KidsPeace if we could partner for this event with KidsPeace kids serving as volunteers. Terry and Executive Director Lou Shagawat enthusiastically agreed. We met with the KidsPeace kids and talked about what to expect.

When the day came, my highest expectations did not even come close to how well the KidsPeace kids did with the special needs participants. I remember how one of the special needs men placed his hand in one of the KidsPeace kids' hands; the young man took that rider's hand and they just stood there, watching the horses together. When it came time to eat, I looked around and several of the KidsPeace kids were spoon-feeding some of the riders as they could not feed themselves.

My hope and prayer is that this is a never-ending love story. You see, one of our daughters that we built the arena for, Sara Sims, is now our Program Director. ◀



*Sandra Floyd developed a love of horses at an early age, as the result of a Girl Scout badge, and her experience with at-risk children and special needs individuals began with volunteer work in high school. Sandra and her husband Buddy have served the community as foster and adoptive parents, and share a passion to plant seeds in youth and adolescents to grow a better life. More information on Rachel's Wish Foundation at Possum Snout Arena at [www.facebook.com/pg/RachelsWishFoundation](http://www.facebook.com/pg/RachelsWishFoundation).*

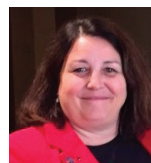
(Continued from page 11: The Amazing Power of Partnership)

In all, horses provide us with a way to see our internal landscape and modes of operation exposed. They offer us the opportunity to experience humility, compassion and challenge – all critical elements to supporting self-growth and self-awareness. By offering a progressive and individualized approach to equine-assisted activities, *Equi-librium* provides participants opportunities to develop motor skills, to enjoy socialization and recreation and to achieve to their highest potential.



And achieve Lily did; within a short time she moved from a private session to a group session with two other girls her age. The group has bonded both at the center and in their private life, creating a social construct that has been nurtured and developed over time together "having fun and learning to ride."

Lily makes the honor roll in school now; she keeps up with her medication schedule and is a happy, well-adjusted teen. Her grandparents cannot say enough about what horses, and *Equi-librium*, have done for her and their family. ◀



*Cheryl Baker is the CEO of Equi-librium, a nonprofit organization where horses give people the opportunity to achieve balance in body, mind, and spirit. Cheryl previously worked as a radio account executive and a marketing and communications professional for several non-profit organizations and companies in Pennsylvania. She earned a bachelor's degree with Moravian College. [www.equi-librium.org](http://www.equi-librium.org).*



# Wild

By Britny Kondravy

# About

# Learning How Nature Nurtures

SF

**T**he Wildlands Conservancy is a non-profit organization dedicated to protection and conservation of the natural environment of the Lehigh Valley and the Lehigh River watershed in eastern Pennsylvania. A pillar of the Conservancy's efforts is educating people in this area about the need to preserve its natural resources and the benefits that flow from a community that values a healthy, sustainable environment for future generations.

In the early 2010s the Conservancy launched a science and literacy-based program in local elementary schools, with the goal of improving academic performance among participating classrooms. But as the community began to focus on addressing behavioral health needs of elementary school children, a new opportunity emerged to blend the experience of nature with support for their social and emotional development.

## **Wild About Learning – from the beginning**

***"Where do chicken nuggets  
come from?"***

In 2013 a student asked that question while eating lunch at a grade school in Bethlehem, PA. It struck a chord with first-grade teacher Maria Miles, who viewed the question as evidence of a growing disconnect between students and nature. To address the disconnect, Mrs. Miles transformed her classroom into a habitat-themed learning lab and enlisted the environmental education services of Wildlands Conservancy. The strategically designed components of programming and place effectively engaged students while supporting one overarching theme: *"Respecting and protecting our ecology is key to our survival as people."*

*(Continued on page 14)*



That experience led Wildlands to develop a science and literacy program called *Wild About Learning*, earning a “Positive Youth Development” designation under United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley’s collective impact strategy. The program launched in 2014 with United Way’s support, which enabled Wildlands Conservancy to provide high quality programming to first-grade classrooms in 14 priority schools (including the school attended by the student seeking information on the origin of chicken nuggets). Each one of the 15 lessons used storybooks, live animals, and hands-on activities to inspire student-driven learning. The lessons culminated in a springtime field experience at the Conservancy’s Dorothy Rider Pool Wildlife Sanctuary in Emmaus, PA.

With added support from community-based funders, by 2018 the program had reached more than 1,600 students. It had also been shown to successfully increase scientific knowledge of environmental topics and bolster an enthusiasm for literature, thereby advancing United Way’s objective to have every student reading at grade level by grade 3. This proven success is what made what happened next all the more surprising: when the details of United Way’s 2018-2022 investment plan were released, my team members and I raced to the education section, only to discover that our popular flagship program no longer fit the funder’s parameters for a Positive Youth Development program.

Faced with the possibility of having to shutter the program, we sought for a new way to use the power of connection with nature - and found it under the following education outcome: *Improve behavioral health of students exposed to trauma in United Way schools.*

### Adjusting the focus towards SEL

Among the new strategies adopted by the funders to meet the needs of at-risk students exposed to trauma was encouraging the implementation of programs that stress “**Social-Emotional Learning**” (SEL). SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to:

- understand and manage emotions;
- set and achieve positive goals;
- feel and show empathy for others;
- establish and maintain positive relationships; and
- make responsible decisions.

In researching SEL, we realized that the approach featured striking parallels with our own organization’s mission and vision. In fact, the core competencies of SEL directly reflected the attributes of a conservationist: A person who recognizes the dynamic relationship between her well-being and the natural world, who demonstrates compassion for living things, who grasps the impact her actions have upon the environment, and who is willing to collaborate with others to effect change.

In addition, we found that numerous studies have shown that daily contact with nature improves a child’s social, psychological, academic and physical health, and such contact buffers the impact of stress and helps the child be better equipped to cope with adversity:

- Children with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are better able to concentrate after contact with nature (*Faber Taylor et al. 2001*).
- Children with views of and contact with nature score higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. (*Faber Taylor et al. 2002, Wells 2000*).
- Children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (*Fjortoft 2001, Grahn et al. 1997*).
- When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (*Faber Taylor et al. 1998, Fjortoft 2000, Moore & Wong 1997*).
- Exposure to natural environments improves children’s cognitive development by improving their awareness, reasoning and observational skills (*Pyle 2002*).
- Nature buffers the impact of life stress on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits (*Wells 2003*).

Armed with this knowledge, we expanded our focus beyond students’ academic success, in order to use environmental education as a tool for promoting social and emotional growth.





## Wild About Learning 2.0

The shift in focus triggered a programmatic metamorphosis, as the essential components of *Wild About Learning* organically lent themselves to SEL-infused content. We realized we could combine things like birding by ear with mindful listening, and meeting an animal that scares you – such as a spider or snake - with an examination of the brain's freeze-flight-fight response. Marrying environmental literacy to the core components of social-emotional learning made us feel like we are on the cusp of something brand new, yet surprisingly obvious. Why had we not done this before?

In this new version of *Wild About Learning*, which debuted in the 2018 – 2019 academic school year, we continued to provide a series of in-school lessons, coupled with a 2-hour field experience at Dorothy Rider Pool Wildlife Sanctuary. However, in this version of the program:

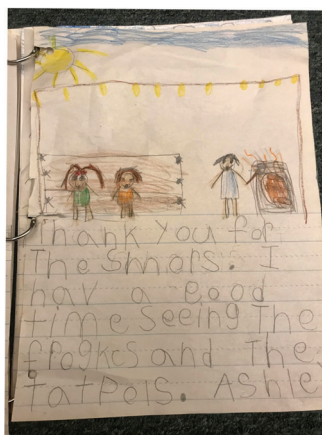
- Students utilize the mind-body connection through breath work, mindfulness, and brain science to build **self-awareness** and **self-management skills** during sequenced lessons under the guidance of a designated Wildlands educator.
- Read-aloud sessions, book discussions and interactions with live animals increase **social awareness and relationship skills**.
- Nature-based experiences prompt **cooperation and responsible decision-making**, reinforced by environmental stewardship opportunities.

Through the approach of *Wild About Learning* 2.0, we are not only promoting environmental awareness and a culture of conservation, but a series of skills that help students develop into capable and resilient individuals as they grow. Thus we are able to serve our mission of promoting environmental awareness and stewardship, and the goals of the community support groups as they relate to behavioral health.

## Wild About ... The Future

At this writing, our revamped *Wild About Learning* program is starting its second year, and we're evaluating the initial program to see how successful we were in helping the more than 300 children who went through the program.

A portion of participant feedback recorded through thank-you notes and educator observations has already revealed how acutely aware students were of the immediate benefits they personally gained as a result of participating.



*("Thank you for the S'mores. I had a good time seeing the frogs and the tadpoles.")*

Considering the fact that students are contractually defined as our program's customers, we view their approval as confirmation we are on the right path, moving forward. ◀

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*Britny Kondravy grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where she went out of her way to find greenery and wild spaces. As an environmental educator, the great outdoors is her preferred classroom. She shares her knowledge of the natural world with summer campers, school students and community groups. She helped spearhead Wildlands Conservancy's "Wild About Learning" program and continues to guide its development and application for both improved literacy and social and emotional health. Britny holds a bachelor's degree in Professional Writing from Kutztown University and is a trained Childlight Yoga and Mindfulness for Children Instructor.*



***When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play...***



*My name is S'Morris.*



(As told to  
Denise Bain)

It has been said that the best therapist has fur and four legs. Well, if fur is what you're after, I'm the fella for you.

I am a St. Bernard who lives in Indiana with my human family. I was put on this earth to make people happy – and I am very good at my job, if I do say so myself.

From the time I came home, weighing just over five pounds, people have been drawn to me. As I continued to grow, so did my personality. It became more and more apparent that I had a special gift. I could make people of all ages smile and my presence brought out the best in those I was around. Thus, my mission began.

I worked hard at becoming my best for about nine months. I would go to class once a week and practice the skills I was learning anywhere I could. I spent quite a bit of time going out in public with my humans. We would visit dog-friendly restaurants, home improvement stores, large outdoor events, and local parks and trails. Turns out, everyone has a story about a dog. After months of practice and mastering my skills, I was ready to test.

The therapy dog test consists of 13 areas, all of which I have to pass to be certified as a therapy dog:

**1: ENTRY TABLE** (Simulated as a Hospital Reception Desk)

Here is where we are greeted. At this time they check my collar, nails, ears and grooming. All four of my paws are lifted and my tail is touched. I cannot have a negative reaction to ANY of these things.

**2: CHECK-IN AND OUT OF SIGHT**

Once check-in has been completed, my human mom takes me in the room and hands me off to the evaluator. My mom tells me to stay and leaves the room for one minute. During this time, I am not allowed to bark or show anxiety about being separated from my person.

**3: GETTING AROUND PEOPLE**

Several people will try visiting with me.

I must demonstrate that I can withstand the approach and touching by several people from all sides at the same time and that I am willing to visit and walk around a group of people. (Between you and me, this is one of my favorite parts!)

**4: GROUP SIT/STAY**

I am lined up with some other dogs. My mom tells me to sit and then to stay. She walks about six feet away from me. When given the command, she returns to me. I have to stay in the sit position the entire time.

**5: GROUP DOWN/STAY**

Same as test # 4, except I will now be in a down/stay position.

**6: RECALL ON A 20 FT. LEASH**

I am put on a 20-foot leash and told to sit/stay. My mom walks 20 feet away from me and the evaluator tells her to call me. I have to come to her and sit at her feet.

**7: VISITING WITH A PATIENT**

I must show willingness to visit a person and demonstrate that I like to be petted.

*and I am a therapy dog.*

*It has been said that the best therapist has fur*



## 8: TESTING OF REACTIONS TO UNUSUAL SITUATIONS

I have to walk with my mom and take directions, turning right and left, and sitting on command. During this time there will also be people in wheelchairs, using crutches, being loud, coughing, and running up behind me, etc... I cannot get distracted or react poorly to any situation they throw my way.

## 9: "LEAVE-IT;" PART ONE

My mom and I meet a person in a wheelchair. I get to visit with them. When they offer me a treat, I have to leave it and not try to take it from them. My mom can tell me to leave it. I am not allowed to have the treat at all.

## 10: "LEAVE-IT;" PART TWO

My mom and I walk in a straight line, with me right next to her. There are bowls lined up with chicken and some with water. I have to walk over the bowls and not lick or eat the food. I cannot drink the water either.

## 11: MEETING ANOTHER DOG

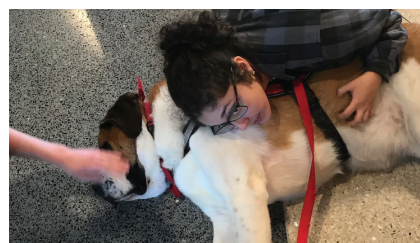
I show that I am well-behaved when meeting other dogs.

## 12: ENTERING THROUGH A DOOR TO VISIT AT THE FACILITY

I have to show that I will let humans enter through doorways before I go through. I cannot try to push my way past them.

## 13: REACTION TO CHILDREN

Children will be running and yelling, playing ball, dropping objects, etc... I cannot try to chase after or jump on the children. I must also show that I can lay down and let a child read to me or cuddle with me.



Not to brag, but I passed my test on the first try! Now I get to go on visits and cheer people up. My mom works for KidsPeace in Indianapolis, and I love going to events and visiting with the KidsPeace staff and foster families. I also enjoy visiting veterans, college students in medical school, and nursing homes. I hope to start volunteering at a local hospital soon.

Besides sharing my abundance of dog hair and bits of slobber with the world, I also share some great benefits with the people I meet. Some of those include:

### For mental health

- Decreases isolation and depression
- Causes many to feel calm
- Bridges communication gaps
- Provides comfort
- Reduces boredom
- Lowers anxiety and decreases agitation
- Reduces loneliness

### For physical health

- The act of petting produces an automatic relaxation response
- Stabilizes blood pressure
- Improves cardiovascular health
- Breathing slows in those who are anxious
- Releases many hormones such as phenyl ethylamine which has the same mood-lifting effect as chocolate

### Anyone can benefit

- Increases socialization /encourages communication
- Helps a person focus
- Maintain & increase motor skills
- Provides motivation to move more, stretch farther, and exercise longer



- Inner contentment may not be verbally expressed but can be seen in eating better, sleeping better, greater cooperation

When I am not out doing visits, I enjoy laying around my house, playing with my dog and human sister, having play dates with my dog friends, getting belly rubs, and seeing how many treats I can get in a day.

I have been a therapy dog for about a year and a half now and I absolutely love every minute of it. I'm even helping to train my little sister, Clover (a golden retriever), how to be a therapy dog.

Gotta run now! But you can follow my adventures on Instagram @smorrisandclover! 🐾



*S'Morris is 3 years old. Along with being a certified therapy dog, he is also a Canine Good Citizen and has his AKC Trick Dog Novice and Intermediate certificates. He is currently working towards his AKC Trick Dog Advanced certificate. Some of the tricks he can do are leaving treats on his paws and not getting them until told to do so, walking with his two front paws up on an exercise ball, walking another dog, and riding a skateboard.*

*S'Morris's mom, Denise Bain, is a family consultant in the KidsPeace Foster Care office in Indianapolis.*



SF

*and four legs.*



# Old Man Fred

## A Story of Love, Loss and Healing

By Kelly Bauer



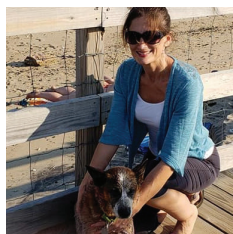
*It was the spring of 2018, and I was just two months shy of my two-year anniversary at my dream job – Executive Director of The Center for Animal Health & Welfare, a non-profit animal shelter. I had just purchased my first home and was planning a trip to my favorite city, Key West, Florida. By all accounts, from the outside looking in, life was perfect...*

For those suffering from mental illness, we know that perfection is an ideology - a wish for a life less complicated. Some days are better than others, and some are so good that perfection doesn't seem so far away. And just like that, our shoulders are seemingly broken by the weight of the world. I know because I have had many of those days in the last 15 years. I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in 2004. For the woman who prided herself on her ability to control a situation, I was ashamed to admit that I could not control the news I received. Although relieved to have an answer to the many questions I had, I was devastated at the thought of being labeled mentally ill.

43.8 million adults experience mental illness in a given year. One in five people will suffer some form of mental illness in their lifetime, yet the stigma related to mental disorders leads to shame, embarrassment and often times failure to properly care

for the disease. For me, using the word "disease" is strange in itself. We are led to believe that mental health is a choice. It took me many years to shed my shame. Even as I accepted my future, I continued to struggle with how to handle the day by day.

For me, the proof of the healing power of connecting with a pet came in the person of a flesh-and-blood friend named Fred.



I grew up with animals, and I began adopting dogs in my early 20's. It wasn't until I began my career at The Center for Animal Health & Welfare that I began to see the therapeutic values of being around them. I noticed how many stories I would hear from adopters whose mental health benefitted from adopting a pet.

May 1, 2018 began as a typical day. My animal care manager Cathy and I were

reviewing the animals in our care. She mentioned a stray dog by the name of "Old Man Fred." An aging cattle dog with vision problems, Fred was suffering from kidney disease. I was informed that Fred was dying and it was only a matter of time before he would lose his battle. She recalled how the last few nights he would cry in his kennel, looking for comfort and the love of a human.

In our field, we are often responsible for finding a loving home for those without one. We are the matchmakers that give a homeless pet the family they oftentimes never had. This time was different. For Fred, we were looking for someone to provide a place for his final days ... and for that I immediately decided he would come home with me.

On our way home, as I gazed in to his broken, yet hopeful eyes, I knew Fred deserved more. In that moment, I decided that Fred would come home with me to live, not just to die.



I wasn't naïve; I knew that Fred's time was limited. I also knew that he needed someone who believed in him ... someone to love him regardless of his flaws. I needed him for the same reasons. While I had friends and family who loved me, it was hard for me to share my struggles. As many do, I viewed my mental health as a weakness. Sharing my struggle made me vulnerable, something I wasn't willing to do.

Fred and I began a "bucket list" journey. I was going to give him the life that every dog should have before they die. In return, unbeknownst to him, Fred was giving me the unconditional love that I was desperately in need of at the time.

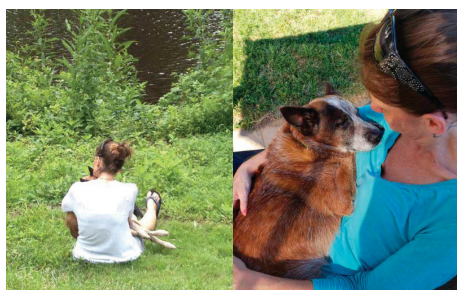


Our journey took Fred and me many places. I took him to vote, we celebrated his birthday (and those he would never see), we went to the beach, joined a yoga class and ate lots of cheeseburgers together. We often rode around in the car so Fred could feel the wind in his hair; the look of contentment and joy on his face each time is something that I will never forget. Each week, we would share our story with our Facebook followers on *Feel Good Friday with Fred*. Thousands of supporters would tune in to share our journey.

Dogs can be a lot to handle, but studies show that responsibility helps your mental health by offering reassurance that you can care for another creature and for yourself. Our journey together was not always easy. Twice daily I had to give Fred intravenous fluids, I would carry him when his body no longer had the strength to walk and I cleaned up many accidents when his bladder just couldn't hold it. Each night before bed, I would snuggle with all my dogs and hold Fred as I sang, "You Are My Sunshine." As Fred would gaze at me, grateful for my love, I was reminded of how lucky I was to be his mom.

As Fred's disease progressed, I began to see that the end was closing in. When days were bad, I would put Fred in the car and we would head to the beach or the closest lake. There was something about being in the water that gave Fred a new lease on life. He would forget his aches and pains as he splashed around like a puppy. He would jump and play, turning back the hands of time until his poor body just couldn't go anymore. I would carry him back to the car and we would stop for a cheeseburger to complete the day.

My journey with Fred ended on July 31st, 2018. After a car ride with all the windows down, two cheeseburgers and one last "You Are My Sunshine" on the river's edge, I held him in my arms as he took his last breath. Fred never took his eyes off me. During the time, I thought he was looking to me for reassurance. After he passed, I realized it wasn't an accident that Fred came into my life. He didn't just need me, we needed each other. I wasn't his savior; I was a girl and he was my dog. Together, we loved freely and without caution.



Fred was ready to go weeks before his death. Looking back, I now know that Fred was hanging on for me. I always felt that Fred could sense his purpose in my life. According to a study published in the journal *Learning & Behavior*, not only can dogs perceive changes in human emotional states, but man's best friend will take it a step further and overcome physical obstacles to go to an owner's aid.

Research also shows that dogs reduce stress, anxiety and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and improve your all-around health:

- A recent study showed that dog owners take 2,760 more steps per day on average compared to non-owners, which amounted to an additional 23 daily minutes of moderate exercise.

- A study published by the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* revealed that pet owners have greater self-esteem and are better able to bounce back from rejection. Other studies have found that a pet can help children develop empathy.

- And the effect is not just mental; research shows that playing with dogs has been shown to elevate levels of oxytocin and dopamine, creating positive feelings and bonding for both the person and their pet. Having a pet has been proven to lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of developing heart disease.

Fred's life was not the miracle cure for my mental illness. Like so many others, I find it is still a daily struggle. What I will say is that Fred's love, the love of all my dogs and every homeless pet that comes to our shelter, gives me purpose. It reminds me of my value and worth.

People can say, "Well, it's just a dog." To that I say, "You are wrong. Have you ever been greeted by a dog after a long day, or even 10 minutes? Tail wagging and butt wiggling, they can hardly contain their excitement for your return. If the human race showed each other that level of love, the world would be a better, kinder place."

By no means do I consider myself an expert or authority on the correlation of pets and mental health. I am simply a dog mom who is unconditionally loved by her pups. I can't give you any profound, life-changing advice, but I will end with this:

**Be the person your dog thinks you are.†**



Kelly Bauer is the Executive Director at the Center for Animal Health & Welfare in Easton, Pennsylvania.

Funded by private donations, their organization cares for over 800 homeless pets each year. For more information, [www.healthyanimalcenter.org](http://www.healthyanimalcenter.org) or join Kelly for *Pawfee Talk*, a weekly broadcast discussing the Good, Bad and Hilarious of All Things Four Legged at [www.facebook.com/cahw1](https://www.facebook.com/cahw1).



**G**etting kids to go to sleep is difficult. But getting a good night's sleep is imperative to making sure they are their best selves and setting them up for success. The same policy applies to you and your sleep, which is even harder to get when your kids need you.

You should be on the lookout for some of the signs that your child isn't getting enough sleep. These include obvious ones, like falling asleep at inappropriate times and the inability to get your child out of bed quickly. They might also include some different behaviors, like having a talkative child be unusually shy or taciturn, having academic struggles, or falling asleep during very short car rides. Not all of these apply--your teenager, for instance, is unlikely to fall asleep on a drive to the store, but they might be irritable and even hyperactive due simply to not getting enough sleep.

# Help

## Your Children Get Better Sleep (And You Too!)

By Amy Highland  
[SleepHelp.org](http://SleepHelp.org)

Here are three ways that you can help your children get a better night's sleep, and help yourself to do the same.

**1**

### Schedule Meals Early

Depending on the age of your child, this may not apply. Infants and toddlers are fairly well known for falling asleep while nursing or eating. However, the older your child gets, the harder it's going to be for their bodies to digest food while they're sleeping, the same way it is for you as an adult.

Try and schedule your meals for 3 to 4 hours before your child's planned bedtime in order to make their life easier. If you have older children, make sure they aren't eating anything after dinner time.







## Create a Bedtime Routine for the Whole Family

Creating a bedtime routine is actually one of the best things you can do for yourself and the rest of your family. It doesn't have to be complicated. In fact, the less complicated it is, the better it's going to be in the long because you'll be able to keep up with it even when you are traveling or your kids are at sleepovers.

Whenever possible, you should personalize the routine to each of your kids. Some kids will need a little bit more in their routines to help get them to settle down, while others just need to be reminded to brush their teeth. Make sure to include some one-on-one time with each of your kids during their bedtime routine so that your kids don't feel left out. This is also a great time to check in with them emotionally and make sure they're doing all right. If sleep has become a source of anxiety, a soothing routine can help your children begin to re-associate sleep with relaxation.

If your kids are old enough to have cell phones or tablets, try to keep them off of electronics during their wind-down time. Electronics with screens emit blue wave spectrum lights which can keep them up later at night by telling their brain to wake up and focus on the screen. Instead, try having them read a book or listen to one on audio.

If you want to include some physical activity, try doing some light yoga as a family. It's great exercise to do before bed because it stretches you out without getting your adrenaline pumping and your heart racing like running would.

Building these habits early will help your kids to take them into their teenage years and adulthood, setting them up for successful sleeping for the rest of their lives.



## Make Bedrooms Comfortable and Cool

Your kids' bedroom should be designed to help them sleep at night. This means that it should be comfortable, calm and cool.

Kids, like adults, sleep best between 15 and 17 degrees Celsius (59-63° F) with good air flow. They also need a comfortable bed to sleep in. If your kid is avoiding going to sleep in their own bed, they might need a new mattress or some new pillows.

You should also work to make sure that there are as few distractions as possible in their rooms at night, as well as in your own. The fewer distractions there are, the less likely you are to get up and start playing with them or working in the middle of the night.

Finally, if you find that you or your children continue to struggle to get to sleep at night, talk to your doctor to see if there is a medical condition that might be causing the problems you are seeing. ◀

*Amy Highland is a sleep expert at SleepHelp.org. Her preferred research topics are health and wellness, so Amy's a regular reader of Scientific American and Nature. She loves taking naps during thunderstorms and cuddling up with a blanket, book, and cats.*





By Fawn McNeil-Haber, Ph.D.

# ENTERING THE FOOD ALLERGY WORLD

**F**or a parent, living in the world of food allergies is like living in an alternate reality. While everyone else is going about their lives, you're worried about your child's safety from, of all things, food. It's YOUR responsibility to get family members, teachers, coaches, and others on the same page about the risks of food allergies. Furthermore, if your child struggles with fears, socializing, or the challenges school brings, the burden can be anxiety-provoking and overwhelming.

The good news is that it is possible to manage food allergies, while you and your child still live life to the fullest.



## Anxiety is Our Friend

Yes, anxiety IS your friend and mine! Anxiety keeps us safe. It can drive us to learn more, teach others, and stick with the ways that keep us (and our children) protected. Anxiety can be anything from worried thoughts to that pit in our stomach that tells us something isn't right. As food allergy parents, it helps keep us on alert to scan and anticipate danger. For children, it can remind them that they must always check labels and ask questions. However, it is important to keep the stress and anxiety manageable.

## Anxiety Can Get Out of Hand

While anxiety can be helpful, it becomes unhealthy if it kicks into overdrive. Some of the signs that food allergy anxiety has taken over include:

- Difficulty sleeping due to worries or physical discomfort
- Constant imagining of the worst-case scenario
- For kids, constant questioning about food and safety (sometimes adults, too)

- Anger and agitation over little things
- Avoidance of previously managed situations (e.g. foods, activities, etc.)
- Excessive crying
- Intrusive thoughts of past reactions or future exposures
- Panic attacks

Keeping a balance between anxiety that drives planning and preparation and anxiety that interferes with your ability to enjoy life is imperative. You CAN learn to keep this balance and show your child how to rock this food allergy journey.

## Tips for Young Kids

Anxiety in children with food allergies is common. Some signs that your child might be anxious include complaining of headaches, stomach aches, and other physical pains. They might cling to you at social gatherings and school or need frequent reassurance that their food is safe. To help your child, there are a few significant things you can do.



First, it is important for your child to feel normal. Remember, every family has their own challenges. Giving your child real-life examples of other challenges families face can be helpful to put things into perspective for your child. Applaud and encourage their strength in meeting ALL challenges.

Second, educate and empower your child. Many times anxiety can stem from a lack of control. Teach your child their allergens, label reading, and who they can trust to give them food. Discuss what a reaction looks like, who to tell, and the role of epinephrine.

Third, DON'T tell them not to worry. Reassurances can be counterproductive. Teach them how to worry: i.e., how to talk it out with you. Explore their concerns. Problem solve with them. Put the worry away. Finally, practice relaxation and self-calming.

Fourth, help them develop their problem-solving skills. The STEPs to solve a problem include: **S**ay the problem. **T**hink of solutions. **E**xplore the consequences. **P**ick a solution.

Lastly, let them be in control when they can. Living with food allergies often can make you feel as though you are not in control. Allowing your child to make their own choices and calm their own concerns is important.



## Tips for Teens

The teenage years are full of changes that create additional stress for your child. Worries about food allergies can add an extra layer of anxiety for your teen. Indeed, at what point do you tell your crush all about your food allergies ... including that your first kiss can't be laced with almonds?

To help your teen with food allergies and anxiety, there are a few key things to keep in mind.

First, be aware of the signs that your teen is feeling anxious. These could indicate a larger problem. Common symptoms include trouble sleeping, irritability, avoidance, unexplained aches and pains, panic attacks, and more. If this is the case, be sure to have an open discussion with your teen about this.

Second, create a space for your teen to speak openly about their concerns. Be careful not to jump in with your own judgements and criticisms. It is important to not dismiss your teen's emotions but instead try to understand and address them. Dating, bullying, underage drinking and college are all areas where teens with food allergies may hit obstacles.



Lastly, educate your teen. At this point in their lives, they are probably familiar with their food allergy plan. Help your teen understand what the signs of anxiety might look like in their bodies. Because panic attacks may mimic the same symptoms as an allergic reaction, it is important for your teen to have a strategy to determine the difference. Without proper education on panic attacks and anxiety, your teen may mistake a panic attack for an allergic reaction.

## Tips for Parents

Managing severe food allergies can be consuming. The stress will ebb and flow with the context of your life and the developmental stage of your child. It is also influenced by your own proclivity to anxiety and previous life circumstances. However, if you feel as though you are overwhelmed

with anxiety related to food allergies, there are a few important things you can do to reduce these worries.

First, increase your awareness. Take note of the Bodily sensations, Emotions, Actions, and Thoughts you are experiencing; this is your life BEAT. Checking in with these four areas can help you when you need extra support before it gets out of hand. You will learn your anxiety triggers and take better can of yourself when they happen.

Second, create a support system. Finding your food allergy tribe is key to feeling supported. This can be family, friends, other food allergy families, online support groups, etc.

Third, enjoy the world that is not ruled by food allergies. Allowing yourself to take a break from the food allergy world is vital to your well-being and care for your child. This might include a separate outing to get your favorite ice cream with a non-food allergic sibling. Doing things you enjoy can be refreshing and refueling so that you can handle the stressors of the food allergy world more effectively.

Lastly, speak up. Being nervous about speaking up regarding your child's food allergies is normal. However, it is important to practice your assertiveness. The more you speak up for your child's needs, the more in control you will start to feel.

While living with food allergies can feel scary and isolating, it does not have to be. With the right resources, skills, and guidance you can cope with food allergy-related stress and live a more fulfilled life. ◀



*Fawn McNeil-Haber, PhD is the owner and Clinical Director of Brave Minds Psychological Services located in Scotch Plains, NJ.*

*With over 20 years of experience in the field of mental health, Dr. Fawn specializes in treating trauma, coaching parents, and anxiety related to food allergies. As a food allergy parent herself, Dr. Fawn is familiar with working through the stress and anxiety that comes with food allergies.*





By WeAreTeachers.com

**W**ith grief, sadness is obvious. With trauma, the symptoms can go largely unrecognized because it shows up looking like other problems: frustration; acting out; difficulty concentrating, following directions, or working in a group. Often students are misdiagnosed with anxiety, behavior disorders, or attention disorders rather than understood to have trauma that's driving those symptoms and reactions.

For children who have experienced trauma, learning can be a big struggle. But once trauma is identified as the root of the behavior, we can adapt our approach to help kids cope when they're at school. Starr Commonwealth Chief Clinical Officer Dr. Caelan Soma offers these tips for understanding kids who have been through trauma plus strategies for helping them.

## 1. Kids who have experienced trauma aren't trying to push your buttons.

If a child is having trouble with transitions or turning in a folder at the beginning of the day, remember that children may be distracted because of a situation at home that is causing them to worry. Instead of reprimanding children for being late or forgetting homework, be affirming and accommodating by establishing a visual cue or verbal reminder to help that child. "Switch your mind-set and remember the kid who has experienced trauma is not trying to push your buttons," says Soma.

## 2. Kids who have been through trauma worry about what's going to happen next.

A daily routine in the classroom can be calming, so try to provide structure and predictability whenever possible. Since words may not sink in for children who go through trauma, they need other sensory





cues, says Soma. Besides explaining how the day will unfold, have signs or a storyboard that shows which activity—math, reading, lunch, recess, etc.—the class will do and when.

### **3. Even if the situation doesn't seem that bad to you, it's how the child feels that matters.**

Try not to judge the trauma. As caring teachers, we may unintentionally project that a situation isn't really that bad, but how the child feels about the stress is what matters most. "We have to remember it's the perception of the child. [...] The situation is something they have no control over, feeling that their life or safety is at risk," says Soma. It may not even be just one event but the culmination of chronic stress—for example, a child who lives in poverty may worry about the family being able to pay rent on time, keep their jobs, or have enough food. Those ongoing stressors can cause trauma. "Anything that keeps our nervous system activated for longer than four to six weeks is defined as post-traumatic stress," says Soma.

### **4. Trauma isn't always associated with violence.**

Trauma is often associated with violence, but kids can also suffer trauma from a variety of situations—like divorce, a move, or being overscheduled or bullied. "All kids, especially in this day and age, experience extreme stress from time to time," says Soma. "It is more common than we think."

### **5. You don't need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help.**

Instead of focusing on the specifics of a traumatic situation, concentrate on the support you can give children who are suffering. "Stick with what you are seeing now—the hurt, the anger, the worry," Soma says, rather than getting every detail of the child's story. Privacy is a big issue in working with students suffering from trauma, and schools often have a confidentiality protocol that teachers must follow. You don't have to dig deep into the trauma to be able to effectively respond with empathy and flexibility.

### **6. Kids who experience trauma need to feel they're good at something and can influence the world.**

Find opportunities that allow kids to set and achieve goals, and they'll feel a sense of mastery and control, suggests Soma. Assign them jobs in the classroom that they can do well or let them be a peer helper to someone else. "It is very empowering," says Soma. "Set them up to succeed and keep that bar in the zone where you know they are able to accomplish it and move forward." Rather than saying a student is good at math, find experiences to let them feel it. Because trauma is such a sensory experience, kids need more than encouragement—they need to feel their worth through concrete tasks.

### **7. There's a direct connection between stress and learning.**

When kids are stressed, it's tough for them to learn. Create a safe, accepting environment in your classroom by letting children know you understand their situation and support them. "Kids who have experienced trauma have difficulty learning unless they feel safe and supported," says Soma. "The more the teacher can do to make the child less anxious and have the child focus on the task at hand, the better the performance you are going to see out of that child. There is a direct connection between lowering stress and academic outcomes."

### **8. Self-regulation can be a major challenge for students suffering from trauma.**

Some kids with trauma are growing up with emotionally unavailable parents and haven't learned to self-soothe, so they may develop distracting behaviors and have trouble staying focused for long periods. To help them cope, schedule regular brain breaks. Tell the class at the beginning of the day when there will be breaks—for free time, to play a game, or to stretch. "If you build it in before the behavior gets out of whack, you set the child up for success," says Soma. A child may be able to make it through a 20-minute block of work if

it's understood there will be a break to recharge before the next task.

### **9. It's OK to ask kids point-blank what you can do to help them make it through the day.**

For all students with trauma, you can ask them directly what you can do to help. They may ask to listen to music with headphones or put their head on their desk for a few minutes. Soma says, "We have to step back and ask them, 'How can I help? Is there something I can do to make you feel even a little bit better?'"

### **10. You can support kids with trauma even when they're outside your classroom.**

Loop in the larger school. Share trauma-informed strategies with all staff, from bus drivers to parent volunteers to crossing guards. Remind everyone: "The child is not his or her behavior," says Soma. "Typically there is something underneath that driving that to happen, so be sensitive. Ask yourself, 'I wonder what's going on with that kid?' rather than saying, 'What's wrong with the kid?' That's a huge shift in the way we view kids." ◀



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*She has been involved in helping with the aftermath of disasters such as Sandy Hook, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and others. She is has authored several books, the most recent, *10 Steps to Create a Trauma Informed School and Healing the Experience of Trauma: A Path to Resilience*.*

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By Donna Pinter

# MINDFUL LISTENING

**T**he writer Francis Hennessey (“The Skill of Mindful Listening,” *Psych Central*, 10/8/2018) writes that he believes the reason many people gravitate to psychotherapy and life coaching is the assurance that they will have direct contact with a focused, engaged and unbiased good listener for a designated period of time, usually 45 minutes. We crave optimal engagement with “digital detachment.” We like to speak with someone who is not constantly checking their phone or texting.

*Mindful listening*, also known as *active listening*, includes a listener whose nonverbal facial and body communications are an integral component of the verbal communication process. Hennessey further states that good listening skills encompass engaging all our senses along with being patient and nonreactive – in other words, being totally in the moment.

Good listeners make us feel validated; that our thoughts and feelings are real and important.

## Silence is Golden

A critical component of mindful listening is the appreciation and incorporation of silence into our conversations and into our lives. Many people are extremely uncomfortable with any period of silence in a conversation, no matter how small, and feel a rush to fill the perceived void - often with meaningless words. Silence can fill our imaginations with anxiety-provoking thoughts. Most of us are quiet in a conversation only as a way of polite waiting until it is our turn to speak, and sometimes we worry that we will forget what we are planning to say when we get our chance to speak. If you are concerned about this, jot down some brief notes as a “tickler” for when it finally is your turn. Silent

reflection also can promote what is called, in medicine, as “a tincture of time.” If you, the listener, resist the urge to just verbally leap into action at the very first moment that a problem arises, you may find that sometimes a problem can fix itself – and the wisest action is not to take any action at all (Dr. Alex Lickerman, “The Undeclared Mind: On the Science of Constructing an Indestructible Self”, *Psychology Today*, 7/21/13).

Silence has been found to stimulate brain growth and that a minimum of two hours of daily silence can actually stimulate the creation of new brain cells in the area of our brains linked to learning and recall. It also appears that silence is more relaxing for our bodies and brains than listening to music as measured by lower blood pressure readings and increased blood flow to the brain. Periods of quiet during the

day also appear to contribute to a better night's sleep and reduce insomnia. The World Health Organization has called noise pollution a "modern plague" and sees noise as a contributor to heart disease and tinnitus.

## How to be an Active Listener

Listening is a complicated skill. It requires the listener to understand, interpret and evaluate what is said. It is important not to confuse hearing with listening. It is critical to learn to focus with empathy on what the other person is saying. We don't have to accept the other's opinion but we do have to remain objective and non-judgmental.

Jeffrey Berman on YouTube gives some helpful hints to use in active listening. Good eye contact is on the list, as is the incredible importance of our non-verbal behaviors to show our interest in what the other is saying. Avoid distracting actions and, above all, don't interrupt. Keep your own emotions in check which entails confronting our own biases and prejudices.

Most parents would like to have more communications with their children, but it seems something mystifying occurs when children morph into teenagers. They stop communicating with adults. If you ask an adolescent how his day went, don't expect much of a reply. Try asking open-ending questions that might be of interest to them. For example ask about the antics of other kids. Who got detention? Did you zone out today? Light conversation can often open the door to more serious issues.

Mindful listening specialists suggest that we should not judge what appears to be a negative person too quickly but, through good listening skills, we try to discern what motivates negative folk and to understand their fears. Other suggestions are:

- Try not to interrupt the speaker. If you slip, apologize and get back on track.
- Do not ever finish another's sentences for them. This is a bad habit which will be infuriating to the speaker as well as a turn-off to the speaker to continue.
- Good listening includes confirming respectfully to the speaker that you have heard her.

This can be especially frustrating if we disagree with what the speaker is saying - harder yet if the speaker's views trigger off a negative emotional response in us.

- Body language is a vital part of mindful listening. Suggestions such as leaning forward but not crossing one's arms or legs are important, as is the right amount of eye contact – not too much or too little.
- Eye contact should be on a level plane with both parties. I recall reading that if you find yourself in a room with an IRS auditor, to remember that the auditor is there to be in charge and will do things opposite to friendly communication like sitting in a higher chair.
- Personal space is an important component in good listening skills. Americans, generally, like to keep physical distance between ourselves and others, especially if we don't know them.
- Another essential ingredient is that the good listener needs to remain calm especially if the topic may be emotionally charged. Give the speaker pauses to think and speak.

## How Adults Can Listen to Children More Effectively

In their publication *Mental Health First Aid USA (2016)*, The National Council for Behavioral Health offers hints for adults on more effective listening to kids:

- Listen non-judgmentally.
- Make young people feel they can talk about their problems without being judged.
- Be genuine.
- Be comfortable with silence.
- Find the right setting.
- Do not compare the young person's life with your own experiences from that age.
- Do not trivialize the young person's experiences.
- Do not ask the young person to justify or explain their behavior.
- Watch your body language.
- Avoid giving unhelpful advice.

## Listening Benefits Everyone

We should all take a moment to determine what kind of a listener we are. *Psychology Today* offers an assessment that can be done in less than 15 minutes just between ourselves and our computers. Go to *Psychology Today* (2018) and take the quiz. It is pretty easy to discern where you stand on the listening scale just by thinking about the questions as you answer them.

When we train our minds and our mouths to be still, it is amazing what we are capable of learning from others and the world around us.

*"When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice,*

*You have not done what I asked,*

*When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,*

*You are trampling on my feelings.*

*God just listens and lets you work it out for yourself."*

*"Please Listen," author unknown*



Donna Pinter obtained her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. She is a licensed psychologist and clinical director of Psychological Services in Sunbury, Danville, and Bloomsburg, PA. Dr. Pinter also writes the newspaper column "Slice of Life," seen in various newspapers, and received the Pennsylvania Psychological Association (PPA) Media Award in 2014.

**...good listening skills encompass engaging all our senses along with being patient and nonreactive...**



(Continued from page 7: OASIS SPACE)

## SELF-CARE JOURNAL EXERCISE

One of the things we encourage our associates to do through OASIS and CIRT is to reflect on the situation or situations that have occurred. Reflection helps us process intense information and helps us reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Think about the following questions and write the answers out as a personal journal entry.

### Journal Questions:

- Do you think we work too hard?
- Do you like the cultural norm around your workplace on working hour expectations?
- How have you been able to limit unhealthy overworking habits?
- How specifically do you engage in self-care?
- Are there any areas of self-care that currently do not have enough attention in your life?

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(Continued from page 9: Animal Assisted Therapy)

then share that because of the program, they now have hope, see a future, and feel like someone cares, I can't help but feel overwhelmed with gratitude and amazement at what this program, and the animals, can do for the overall wellbeing of these kids.

When we started this program back in 2016, I wanted to make a difference in my community and for the children and animals who are so deserving. I am grateful for all I have learned, and for being allowed to be a small part of the lives of these kids and the animals who participate in this program. ◀



*Laura Clawson is the Owner, Certified Dog Trainer, and behavior consultant at Unleash the Pawsitive, LLC in Carrollton, GA. She is a graduate of the Animal Behavior College in California, where she received her first dog training certification. Laura is proud to be a Victoria Stilwell Positively Dog Trainer (VSPDT), and is also a member of the Pet Professional Guild (PPG), an educator for Family Paws Parent Education, an AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) evaluator, and a graduate of Franklin Pierce University in New Hampshire.*

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# A Story of Success - Powered by **TRICARE**

## Building a Foundation of Hope

By Zachary D. Venable, MEd, MSW, LSW

One of the consistent challenges that we face with when working with youth and their families is the lack of hope that many have when they come to our residential treatment center (RTC) program at KidsPeace. Often they have already participated in a myriad of behavioral health/mental health services, and unfortunately many of them have not had positive experiences that allow for the creation and fostering of hope.

I was assigned such a case several months ago, involving a youth whose family is covered by TRICARE. This young woman had been transferred from another RTC program; her parents reported that they were not satisfied with the level and type of care she had been receiving and wanted something different.

The youth had been referred for a higher level of care due to significant issues with physical aggression towards family members and peers. There were also concerns related to her ability to interact appropriately with same-age peers, as well as her lack of understanding of boundaries with others – particularly strangers. She and her parents stated she had been involved in multiple services since a very young age, and they were apprehensive about engaging with another provider, given their experiences. I acknowledged their concerns and assured them that we would do our best to provide them with what they needed to be successful, facilitate healing, and instill hope.

Many of our initial sessions were focused on developing an understanding of the impact their involvement with service providers had on the youth and her family. Sessions then shifted to identifying the



strengths and barriers the family felt they possessed, and how both could be utilized in order to facilitate genuine positive change. This positive change, if recognized and embraced, would be a way for the youth and her parents to be successful and experience the hope they all had been lacking.

Initially there was much resistance, as the youth focused much on how things had not worked in the past, and that our sessions would not make a difference. In family therapy sessions her parents were guarded and spoke frequently to what did not work for their daughter. They were concerned about if things would change for the better and if their daughter would have to remain in placements for the rest of her life.

The approach I had to take within these sessions was one of optimism. I made it a point to highlight the “little victories” that the youth and her family were able to accomplish throughout their lives, as well as during her stay at the RTC. I engaged in evidence-based strategies designed to help identify how her negative/positive thoughts and feelings affect her behaviors and interactions. I also reiterated the importance of using the past as a guide, not an indicator of how the future will turn out.

With time, the youth and her family began presenting as more amenable to the idea of things being better. All began to speak more positively about their situation and identified a renewed sense of hope for the youth and for their family. The weekly meetings became an environment where all could communicate more freely and plan for the eventual return of the youth to the home. Scheduled home passes went on without any significant issues. The family continued to remain focused on the prospect of improvement and positive change.

There were still challenges, of course; long-standing struggles, particularly those related to behavioral/mental health, are not resolved overnight. However, once she and her family were able to recognize the possibility of change, success, and hope, things did progress in a more positive direction. Ultimately, the youth was discharged back home to her family, with less restrictive aftercare services in place. ◀

Zachary Venable is a senior clinician at KidsPeace.



TRICARE is the health care program for uniformed service members, retirees, and their families. KidsPeace's adolescent hospital and residential treatment programs at the Orchard Hills Campus in Pennsylvania are TRICARE certified.



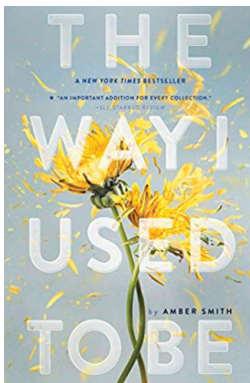


## Book Review:

# The Way I Used To Be

By Amber Smith (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Jamie Pfister



*“The Way I Used To Be” explores the damage of a sexual assault and how as a freshman in high school Eden attempts to turn her fears and challenges into inspiration. Eden struggles to find her way through an already pivotal time in adolescence to become a survivor rather than a victim.*

Most books you read on sexual assault are memoirs or narratives

of the trauma that someone has endured previously in their lives. The novel *“The Way I Used To Be”* is unique, as it is a moment-to-moment chronicle of the victim’s battle with recovery. Eden’s journey through adolescence (the time when a large number of sexual assaults happen for young women) is articulated as she is living through the experiences.

The word “violence” usually evokes images of visible mayhem; mass shootings, robberies, and terroristic acts. However, the aftermath of sexual violence is often times unseen psychological injury detrimental to a victim’s overall well-being. Sexual violence is a critical public health concern because the psychological, emotional and social impacts of sexual assault can remain long after the violence has stopped. Sexual assault victims are more likely than non-victims of crime to have a major depressive episode, four times more likely to have contemplated suicide, and 13 times more likely to have attempted suicide. Childhood sexual assault is associated with numerous short- and long-term psychological problems - ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder and issues related to unhealthy self-esteem and self-identity, to interpersonal difficulties such as aggression, withdrawal, lack of trust and attachment and increased sexual promiscuity.

The trauma of sexual violence is not something we can “fix;” it is something we can assist in managing on a daily basis. It takes support and work, and that work is

sometimes as chaotic, complex and complicated as the individual’s experience of the assault.

*“The Way I Used To Be”* is a story of a young woman making her way through high school as she struggles with a devastating experience with someone close to the family. She is among the vast majority who experiences sexual assault by someone they are familiar with. This is contrary to the long-standing myths about “stranger danger” and the threats that these crimes are committed by people that the victims do not know. The reality is that in over 90 percent of childhood sexual assault cases, the child knew their offender. This is evident in Eden’s story as she had to endure seeing her offender the very next morning and again for years to come.

One of the most notable aspects of the narrative is the inconsistencies between Eden’s psychological process with thoughts and feelings and her actual behaviors. When intervening with trauma survivors, particularly sexual assault victims, often times we are not fully aware of the emotional and cognitive process that they are experiencing internally. It is vital for us to recognize that every behavior a survivor engages in has a necessary function. When a survivor is demonstrating outward signs of aggression, promiscuity, substance abuse, etc., they may be trying in some way to meet a need. The latter examples may be ways in which victims cope with their trauma in an attempt for self-preservation or merely survival. We see the incongruence throughout Eden’s story highlighted by the disparity of her internal and external experiences and coping skills. What survivors once loved, they now hate; what they once thought to be true, soon feels like lies; often times they can’t make sense of the world; they know they should tell someone, but they can’t. In Eden’s story, she buries the truth for years and in turn, ends up burying her identity and much, much more.

This book provides readers with a better understanding of the psychological turmoil that a survivor of sexual assault goes through and the lasting effects it can have

on interpersonal relationships. It demands that people be mindful, to better relate to the trauma experiences of others. It helps create empathy by allowing readers to understand that it is not just “putting yourself in their shoes;” instead, empathy is the ability to make a cognitive and emotional connection with another person. These connections may increase our ability to understand, share the feelings of another, gain awareness and appreciate the source of where their behaviors may be coming from. As evidenced in the book, survivors oftentimes attempt to express their thoughts and feelings in how they behave and interact with others.

This story takes a realistic look at the lasting effects of trauma, especially as it pertains to how survivors love, form relationships, cope and navigate through adolescence. It’s an insightful look into how survivors want so badly to be vulnerable in their relationships and interactions with others, but instead may tend to push others away. This book is an important and insightful read for those interacting and supporting young women who have lived through and survived sexual assault.

*Jamie Pfister, MPH, is Trauma Focused Program & Staff Development Specialist at KidsPeace.*

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