

## **“But You Seem So ‘Normal’—What We All Can Learn from Resilient Survivors of Childhood Abuse”**

--Julie Brand, M.S.

In the United States, a staggering number of children experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse. To address the problem of child maltreatment, we must first *acknowledge* how pervasive it is. Next, we must *believe* that victims can heal and recover. We then must *learn* strategies from the many survivors who have overcome their traumas. Finally, we must *teach* those survivors’ skills to other abuse victims so they, too, can lead healthy, happy, productive lives. The cycle of child abuse can be broken when we heal ourselves and learn how to help others recover.

### **Seven Key Steps to Becoming a Survivor:**

- **Awareness**
- **Separation**  
*There must be a fundamental psychological separation from the abuser.*
- **Connection**
- **Responsibility**
- **Empathy**
- **Laughter—the “gift of humor”**
- **Compassion and love for self and others**

The victim’s psychological, philosophical and spiritual interpretations of his/her traumatic experiences are critical and often overlooked parts of the recovery process. Victims of child abuse did not deserve their trauma, whether it was rape or physical assault or horrific emotional abuse.

The victim believes, “It must have been my fault. I deserved it.”

The survivor believes, “It wasn’t my fault. I *deserve* to have a happy, healthy life.”

### **“The Language of Resiliency”**

Many people have a propensity for surviving trauma if they can learn to see themselves as strong, competent individuals. It is not just *what* happens to us but *how those experiences are described*—the language used and the complementary emotions solicited—that determines how we store the experiences in memory.

**The identical life event can be destructive or neutral or *even empowering* for different individuals, depending on their perceptions about themselves and the experience.**

Self-blame is often the lasting legacy of childhood trauma. Self forgiveness is essential to recovery.

**Language-based intervention techniques to use with victims: Words Matter**

- **“Re-framing”**—a conscious and intentional cognitive strategy that can be used to create a shift in perspective from “victim” to “survivor;” reinforced through repetition

**Instead of:**

“Oh, I’m so sorry that happened.”  
“Did you do something to make her mad?”  
“You poor kid—you were helpless.”

**Try saying:**

“I’m so *glad you told* me.”  
“It was *not your fault*.”  
“Your good thinking kept you alive.”

- **“Strength-building”**—deliberately selecting words that identify and reinforce victims’ strengths, abilities and skills, thus constructively impacting his or her self-perception, perspective, behavior and life script

**Language To Reinforce Strengths and Build Resiliency:**

“That was very *brave* of you.”  
“It took *courage* to tell.”  
“You made the best choice.”  
“You are a *strong* (*kind, caring, responsible*) young man (*woman*).  
“Now that you’ve told, things can start to get better for you.”

**Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?**

Upon observing a half glass of water:

- 1) “The glass is half empty.” *(Pessimism)*
- 2) “The glass is half full.” *(Optimism)*
- 3) “The glass is only half full but look--here comes someone to fill it up!” *(Optimism, connection)*
- 4) “The glass is only half full but I see a water fountain over there and I’m going to go fill it up.” *(Optimism, responsibility)*
- 5) “The glass is only half full. I see a water fountain over there and I’m going to go fill it up. While I’m there, may I fill yours, too?” *(Optimism, responsibility, connection)*