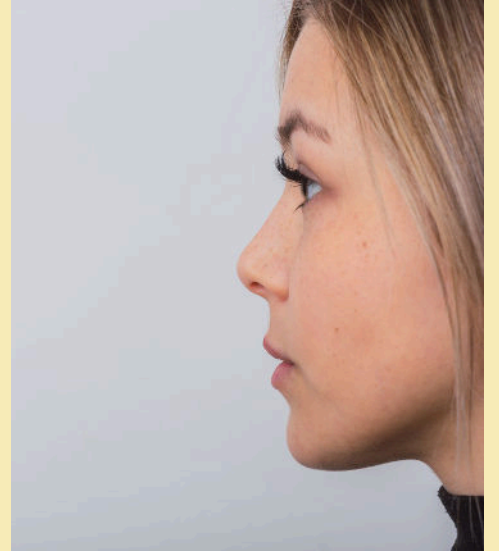


RECOVERY

The official newsletter of the RCORP Rural Center of Excellence on SUD Recovery at the Fletcher Group



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BEYOND THE BAND-AID



by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

In a world that often tells us to "just get over it," a radically different approach to mental health is changing the conversation from judging people's behavior to understanding their history.

Cecily McMillan, a former foster youth and author of the book *The Scars of the Chosen*, shared in our most recent webinar a number of key insights suggesting that our most difficult habits aren't just "problems"—they're survival strategies.

The key takeaway? True resiliency isn't about never falling. It's about having the right connections and education to keep moving forward.

On the following three pages we've condensed McMillan's insights into a three-part guide designed to help rural residents understand the complex world of trauma and the simple tools that can be used to overcome it.



IT'S AN INSIDE JOB

According to Cecily McMillan, healing the wounds of trauma is an "inside job," meaning it requires an internal process of awareness, acceptance, and personal responsibility. The natural inertia for many, however, is to continue investing time and energy on outward appearances, effectively prioritizing what impresses others rather than what we feel inside.

Fruit Vs. Root

"We often treat our emotional struggles like a messy garden where we keep trimming the branches—the fruit—without ever looking at the soil where the root of the problem lives," says McMillan. By "fruit" McMillan means the many outwardly visible behaviors we employ to hide or distract us from the root problem. Those behaviours include such things as overeating, workaholism, drug use, or a quick-to-flare temper.

"Unfortunately, many people focus their coping skills on the fruit," says McMillan, "instead of using those skills to address the root. Whether it's getting a new hairstyle, losing ten pounds, or building up a massive bank account, focusing on the fruit is just a way to perform for others while remaining torn apart on the inside."

Straight to the Source

To move past those surface-level fixes, it's better, says McMillan, to investigate and identify the underlying cause. For many, the source of distress is found in childhood experiences that have not been fully processed. "When we focus only on managing symptoms," says McMillan, "we're merely putting a bandaid over the wound. That allows the underlying infection to ooze out and cause further damage."

Genuine transformation, says McMillan, requires that we be okay with feeling things that hurt and okay also with processing the pain completely rather than suppressing it to survive.

A Better Question

The most powerful tool for such deep work is a simple change in the questions we ask ourselves and those around us.

"We need to stop the shame-filled cycle of wondering what's wrong with me," says McMillan, "and instead embrace a more compassionate inquiry.



WATCH THE VIDEO

of our March 5 webinar with survivor, author, and program director Cecily McMillan.

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"Instead of asking, 'What's wrong with you?' we should shift our perspective and instead ask, 'What happened to you? And what did that do inside of you?'"

By asking what happened, says McMillan, we strip away the heavy shame that causes us to hide behind our experiences. That shift in language allows us to stop 'the art of pretending well' and start the actual work of healing.

"Only by clearing our lens and identifying the original trauma can we build the resilient coping skills needed to finally address the root and achieve lasting wholeness."

TRIGGERS AND TRANTRUMS

Triggers act as invisible tripwires in the recovery process, often appearing as visceral reactions to specific people, places, things, or even smells. According to McMillan, triggers manifest in two primary ways, either as "head attacks" or "heartaches."

"Head attacks are intrusive memories, similar to a scary scene in a horror movie, that are difficult to switch off," says McMillan. "Heartaches, on the other hand, are intense emotional overloads."

McMillan notes that triggering episodes are not confined to moments of high stress. They can attack during even the most mundane, day-to-day activities, such as driving, combing your hair, or brushing your teeth. The most common involuntary reaction is to immediately "shrink back" within yourself, fearful that the sudden internal turmoil is visible to everyone around you.

A Fork in the Road

Learning how to manage such moments, says McMillan, is the key to healing. "When something triggers something within you, it can really be an opportunity to validate your feelings, understand that your past trauma was not your fault, and begin to take control of your own mental health."

On the other hand, when an individual is unable to address their triggers, or refuses to do so, the result can be what McMillan calls a "trauma tantrum." In adults, this can be a sudden fit of anger such as slamming a door, yelling, or cursing. Others may react differently with, for example, a complete emotional shutdown. What people need to do, however, is to look past the visible behavior and understand it as a natural behavioral response to long-held internal pain that's never been fully addressed.

In other words, trauma tantrums stem from the lack of a 'mature inner voice' and the tools needed to advocate on behalf of their own genuine needs.

McMillan's own history of trauma tantrums, she admits, occurred, time and time again, because she lacked the ability to ask for protection or help without feeling intense shame. She used anger as an inarticulated call for help, hoping that someone would



notice and figure out what she needed. Of course, it wasn't them that needed to figure that out. It was her.

"The tantrum comes when you can't address, or refuse to address, the root cause," says McMillan. The anger then becomes just another outward-facing behavior that prolongs the pain by distracting us from the real problem.

To grow and find peace, says McMillan, we have to stop masking or suppressing the real pain and develop instead the resilient coping skills needed to identify and address the root cause.

"That means validating your feelings and the natural human right you have to feel triggered," says McMillan. "But it also means learning that you don't have the right to project that trauma onto others through your behavior."

YOUR RESILIENCY TOOLKIT

Talk about counter-intuitive! Isn't vulnerability—the first tool in McMillan's resiliency toolkit—exactly what a life of performative bluster is designed to prevent? But there's no way around it, says McMillan. Radical transparency is the only way to expose the wound and begin the healing.

How It Works

Vulnerability is a "superpower," says McMillan, because it shifts the healing process from a cosmetic, ineffectual level of engagement to a transformational level. While superficial strength relies on suppression, vulnerability seeks truth which is the only way to achieve genuine authenticity and wholeness. By choosing to be transparent about personal trauma, individuals stop hiding behind their experiences and begin the necessary work of addressing them directly.

Stay the Course

Whatever pain has been hidden must be processed "all the way through" by sitting patiently with it long enough to understand and address its origin. Along the way, vulnerability:

- Removes shame by shifting the conversation from a shame-based "What is wrong with you?" perspective to a compassionate "What happened?" approach that makes people comfortable enough to open up.
- Breaks cycles of dysfunction by empowering and requiring personal accountability. People can't heal without the willingness to be vulnerable and inquire about one's own pain.
- Empowers others by showing that it's okay to be honest about whatever we've gone through. Our lives can even provide others with a kind of roadmap for their own recovery, turning personal pain into a tool for collective growth.

How to Start

Choosing the right support system is critical for root-based healing. A necessary first step is learning the difference between "teachers"—those who have overcome similar struggles and can therefore provide the tools, patience, and grace necessary for genuine transformation—and "groomers" who massage your ego to keep you in a state of dysfunction. It's also important to distinguish between a "barrier"—a defensive wall built by fear to hide behind and keep

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everyone out—and a "boundary," which to McMillan is a proactive tool that allows us to recharge by demanding that others respect our legitimate real-time needs, including the need to say no.

How It's Done

According to McMillan, lasting change follows a three-step model:

- **Own It:** Admit that you have been hurt and that your current behaviors may stem from unaddressed trauma.
- **Change It:** Create new systems for your life, using your life experience as a curriculum to build a new path to wholeness.
- **Teach It:** Break your recovery process into lessons to help others which, in turn, will reinforce your own healing.

Ultimately, resiliency is not about never falling, says McMillan. It's about having the right connections and education to continue moving forward. By engaging with healthy environments and replacing barriers with boundaries, trauma survivors can transform their pain into a powerhouse for growth.