

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise sky with soft, golden light and scattered clouds. In the center, two hands are shown in silhouette, holding a heart that is cracked down the middle. The hands are positioned on either side of the heart, with fingers gently gripping it. The overall mood is one of hope and healing.

Power of Healing

CAMPAIGN READER

A collection of our favorite
guest blog posts

2025


Resilient
GEORGIA

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There's power in healing.

Throughout 2025, we were honored to showcase some of the leaders throughout our network as part of our "Power of Healing" campaign: a [collection of guest blog posts](#) exploring powerful journeys of healing and recovery and the resilience that fuels them.

We welcomed all diverse mental health and resilience topics that our partner guest bloggers felt strongly about, with the hope of inspiring and encouraging readers throughout Georgia. Our different perspectives and viewpoints bring us together.

To each partner we asked the same: Be yourself and write from the heart.

We're grateful to these authors for their bravery, honesty, and willingness to share. Their vulnerability has inspired us to look within ourselves and rediscover how our challenges have made us stronger.

Our hope is that these stories encourage you on your journey to resilience.

With vulnerability,

Nikki Warner
Regional Program Manager
Resilient Georgia



“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

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Healing from Anxious Attachment: My Path to Secure Relationships

FEATURED WRITER : Alex English



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Healing isn't a destination, it's a journey. One that's nonlinear and deeply personal. My journey began with the unsettling realization that my relationships were defined more like episodes of a reality TV show; anxiety-filled and always waiting for the other shoe to drop. I came to understand after my marriage ended, and began therapy, that I had unknowingly developed an anxious attachment style, which shaped how I interacted in friendships, with colleagues, and romantic relationships throughout my life.

For me, having an anxious attachment style meant living with a deep-rooted fear of abandonment, constantly seeking reassurance, and becoming overly obsessed with the need to always be chosen or liked. I'd find myself overanalyzing every text message or interaction, fearing rejection in the majority of connections with people in my life, and feeling overwhelmed by a nagging sense of never being enough.

Understanding My Attachment Style

I learned that attachment styles develop in early childhood, influenced by how consistent and responsive our caregivers were. There are four main attachment styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. My anxious attachment likely stemmed from inconsistency in my early relationships, where love and care were available but not reliable. This created a pattern of craving closeness while simultaneously fearing it.

If any of this resonates with you, I encourage you to explore your own attachment style. Gaining insight into these patterns has been a powerful tool for my self-awareness and healing. Therapy was a crucial starting point for me, but resources like the [Attachment Project's](#) quiz also helped me understand my attachment tendencies and kickstart my healing process.

My Healing Journey

Healing my anxious attachment style hasn't been easy. It required deep introspection and a willingness to confront the uncomfortable truths about myself and my relationships. Therapy, particularly Attachment-Based Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), has been transformative. Through these sessions, I've learned to recognize the fears driving my anxiety and challenge the unhealthy thoughts that kept me stuck in insecurity and unhealthy relationship patterns.

When I asked my therapist about a key breakthrough moment on this journey, she reminded me how proud she was of the initiative I'd already taken by researching attachment styles, taking the online assessments, and reading all the books I could to better understand myself. She highlighted how my thought patterns, developed over many years, weren't a reflection of who I am but rather the result of the relationships I had chosen. Many of those relationships were with people who leaned toward avoidant attachment styles or lacked the emotional availability to meet my needs. This realization, that I wasn't "broken" or a "complete mess," helped me reframe my self-perception.

That clarity hit hard, especially as a parent. I didn't want my children to internalize similar patterns or grow up misunderstanding what healthy relationships should look like with others and with themselves. This turning point reshaped not only how I approached my healing but also how I approached parenting. I'm committed to breaking the cycle and showing my children what secure, loving relationships look like—starting with the one I have with them.



Developing practices that foster self-love and self-reliance has been essential in this process. I've educated myself on attachment styles, challenged negative self-talk, set healthy boundaries, and embraced my worth in relationships—even walking away when others couldn't see it. These changes have not only strengthened my relationships but have also provided my children with a model of security and emotional resilience.

What I've Learned

This journey is ongoing, requiring patience, self-compassion, and a commitment to self-awareness. One of the most profound lessons I've learned is that healing isn't about erasing the past; it's about integrating those practices into the person I'm evolving into. I've found strength in my story and have embraced vulnerability, genuine connection, and, most importantly, my own worth. However, it's important to recognize that healing looks different for everyone. While therapy has been a cornerstone of my journey, not everyone has access to it due to cost or other barriers. For some, healing might come through community support, cultural or religious practices, or personal exploration using books, workshops, or podcasts. There's no one-size-fits-all path to growth.

Another one of my biggest fears after learning about attachment styles and how they are deeply rooted in childhood experiences was how my divorce might impact my children and their ability to form healthy relationships. Have I already royally screwed them up? Will they follow my same patterns? What do I do?!

Thankfully, I came upon this book, [Raising Securely Attached Kids](#) by Eli Harwood, which reassured me in so many ways. It deepened my understanding of how I can help my children feel secure as they grow older. Here are just a few key reminders I took away from this book:

1. Connection Over Correction

Harwood emphasizes that strong parent-child relationships are built on emotional connection, not endless discipline. Instead of focusing on correcting behavior, she teaches how to connect with your child on a deeper level to understand the emotions driving their actions.

2. The Power of Presence

Children need their caregivers' emotional presence more than constant perfection. Harwood explains how being fully present in moments of joy, sadness, or conflict helps to create lasting security in a child's mind.

3. Responding, Not Reacting

In moments of high stress, it's easy to react emotionally. The book encourages parents to pause and respond thoughtfully, nurturing a child's emotional needs instead of reacting out of frustration or fear.

4. The Importance of Repairing After Conflict

This is so very important, y'all. Conflict in any relationship is inevitable, but what matters is how parents repair and reconnect afterwards. Harwood explains how to model apologies and emotional repair, giving children the tools to mend their own relationships in the long run.

5. Cultivating Emotional Intelligence

The book emphasizes the importance of helping children name and understand their emotions. Through this, children learn to navigate complex emotional landscapes and become more resilient in the face of adversity.

6. Parenting Through Your Own Emotional Triggers

Harwood reminds readers that our own childhood experiences and emotional triggers can interfere with how we parent. It's so important to cultivate self-awareness and know when we are being triggered. This allows us to step back and check ourselves, so it doesn't negatively impact our children. She provides tools to work through these challenges.

Healing from anxious attachment has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding journeys of my life. It's not about achieving perfection; it's about making progress. Each small step forward brings me closer to the relationships that I deserve. While the path isn't always easy, I've learned that growth is possible, and I am stronger than my fears. This journey has shown me that I can build the secure, fulfilling relationships I deserve, starting with the one I have with myself. If you're on this journey too, remember, you are worthy of love, connection, and healing, exactly as you are.



Practical Tools for Healing Attachment Styles

If you're navigating your own path of healing from an anxious attachment style, here are some tools that helped me:

- **Seek out therapy or professional guidance:** Seeking support from a mental health professional can provide a safe space to explore your attachment style and develop healthier patterns. Therapy options can include [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy \(CBT\)](#), [Emotionally Focused Therapy \(EFT\)](#), and [Attachment-Focused EMDR Therapy](#).
- **Practice mindfulness and self-regulation techniques:** Practices like mindfulness meditation, deep breathing, grounding exercises, and taking a walk can help manage the overwhelming emotions that often accompany anxious attachment. Apps like Headspace or Calm offer guided practices that are easy to incorporate into daily life.
- **Educate yourself:** Understanding attachment theory and its impact on adult relationships can be incredibly empowering. Books like *Attached*, *The Power of Attachment*, *The Body Keeps the Score*, and *Raising Securely Attached Kids* offer deep insights into how to navigate relationships from a place of security.
- [Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find—and Keep—Love](#) by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller
- [The Power of Attachment: How to Create Deep and Lasting Intimate Relationships](#) by Diane Poole Heller
- [Raising Securely Attached Kids](#) by Eli Harwood
- [Secure Love: Create a Relationship that Lasts a Lifetime](#) by Julie Mennano
- [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#) by Bessel van der Kolk
- Listen to a podcast on attachment: Dive deeper into attachment theory and listen to real life stories on attachment styles and relationships.
- [On Attachment](#) hosted by Stephanie Rigg
- [Let's Talk Attachments](#) hosted by Jessica Da Silva, LMFT
- [Attachment Theory in Action](#) hosted by Kristy Nolan with The Knowledge Center

Host Kirsty Nolan sits down with experts in attachment, trauma, and child development to talk about the stuff that really matters—how trauma shapes behavior and development, how to build stronger relationships, and how to bring these insights into your daily work.

- Take the Attachment Style Quiz: The [Attachment Project's attachment style quiz](#) is a valuable tool for understanding your attachment style. It provides personalized feedback and practical steps you can take to heal and grow.
- Work to build secure relationships: Learning to identify and cultivate secure relationships, whether friendships, romantic partnerships, or work connections, can be so rewarding. Secure relationships provide a safe environment where we can practice vulnerability, set boundaries, and experience love without fear.

Author's Bio: As Senior Regional Program Coordinator at Resilient Georgia, Alex English plays an integral role in the organization's statewide coalition building efforts. Prior to joining Resilient Georgia, English served as the Director of Outreach and Training and co-founder of the Resilient Communities of Southwest Georgia coalition, an initiative being led by the Vashti Center in Thomasville, GA. Alex led marketing campaigns and developed resources to expand accessibility to local resources and behavioral health services for children and families throughout the rural Southwest Georgia region.

During her time as a coalition leader, she was instrumental in facilitating professional training sessions on topics including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), trauma-informed care, child sexual abuse prevention, suicide prevention, and fostering resiliency. Her efforts have impacted over 3,000 community members since August 2020.

My Journey Towards Self-Compassion: Feeling and Healing Through Life's Challenges

FEATURED WRITER : Tara Jones



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They say divorce is one of life's most stressful events. For me, it began in 2019. After 18 years of marriage, my husband and I mutually realized our relationship was no longer working. No betrayal, no drama—just a gradual shift that left our home feeling uncomfortable. No one was thriving, including my 12-year-old. After careful consideration, we decided to part ways.

Here's something about me: I don't settle for "good enough." If there's room to grow, I take it. So, while navigating divorce and raising an almost-teenager, I also pursued a master's degree. Then the pandemic hit. Suddenly, I was juggling a divorce, a teenager, an advanced degree, and a global health crisis—all at once.

- ✓ Divorce
- ✓ Teenager
- ✓ Master's degree
- ✓ Pandemic

But did I acknowledge the toll? Nope. I kept pushing forward, determined to stay productive.

Fast forward to 2024. The divorce is final, my child is thriving, and my career is on track. I now work in mental health and resilience, teaching others to recognize stress and trauma. But here's the irony—I never acknowledged my own.

Others noticed. "You're not practicing what you preach," they'd say. Even my daughter pointed it out: "Mom, you're not being very resilient right now." Still, I ignored it.

Then came the breakdown. In my kitchen. Over baby meatloaves. (Yes, baby meatloaves. That's a story for another time.)

Hurricane Helene had just passed, leaving many with severe damage. My family was lucky—we only lost power for a few days and had to toss some spoiled food. But that spoiled food was my last straw.

Why? Because for years, I told myself my struggles didn't "count" since others had it worse. My divorce wasn't ugly. My degree was online. I had a supportive co-parent and family. I kept working through the pandemic. What right did I have to feel overwhelmed?

But here's the truth: pain isn't a competition.

I always say, "You have to feel it to heal it." But I wasn't following my own advice. I buried my emotions under busyness, convincing myself I was fine. Until I wasn't.

That moment was my wake-up call.





YOU ARE WORTHY OF LOVE

It marked the beginning of what I call my Tara 2.0 era (because everything needs a Taylor Swift reference, right?) I started embracing self-compassion, prioritizing my health, and allowing myself to slow down. It wasn't easy, but I learned that taking care of myself made me better equipped to care for others. And hopefully, my teenager is picking up on some healthy habits too.

Learning to Heal through Teaching Resilience

What really solidified my healing journey was the work I do leading resilience-building programs with [Resilient Coastal Georgia](#). Facilitating the Community Resiliency Model (CRM), Resilience Enhancement and Leadership Model (REALM), and Positivity and Relaxation Training (PART) didn't just help others—it changed me. In teaching these programs, I learned how to apply the concepts to my own life. CRM helped me understand how stress manifests physically and gave me tangible wellness skills to regulate my nervous system. Positivity & Relaxation Training reinforced the mind-body connection, showing me firsthand how practicing mindfulness techniques and challenging my thoughts could shift my entire mindset. I realized that healing isn't about avoiding stress; it's about learning how to process and move through it. These programs didn't just help the community members I serve—I was learning right alongside them.

The Takeaway

Allow yourself to *feel*.

Don't wait for a "big" trauma or crisis to force you into recognizing the importance of your own well-being. Life's smaller challenges—when ignored—can pile up and have a profound impact. Give yourself permission to put yourself first. Because only when you take care of *you* can you truly thrive and show up for those around you.

If you're going through something hard, know this: *your feelings are valid*. Take the time to acknowledge them. Give yourself the grace to feel and heal. Healing isn't linear. It's messy, uncomfortable, and sometimes it looks like crying over baby meatloaves. But it's also freeing. The more we allow ourselves to feel, the more we create space for growth. Wherever you are on your journey, know that you are not alone. And please—give yourself the same grace and compassion you so freely offer to others. You deserve it.

Resources That Helped Me (and Might Help You Too!)

- ***With Love, Your Friend* by Hannah Neal** – A beautiful journal that helps you explore self-compassion and shift unhelpful inner narratives.
- ***The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk** – A must-read on how trauma affects the body and mind, with science-backed ways to heal.
- **Movement & Mindfulness** – Yoga, breathing exercises, and simple walks can reconnect you to your body and emotions. What movement works best for *you*?
- **Insight Timer or Calm App** – Guided meditations to help you slow down and reconnect with yourself.
- **Community Resiliency Model (CRM), Mindful Self-Compassion, Positivity & Relaxation Training** – These programs teach resilience, mindfulness, and the mind-body connection. If you are interested in any of these programs, please email me at tara@coastalgaindicators.org or visit the [Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council](#) website to learn more.

Author's Bio: Tara Jones is an engaged community health advocate in Savannah, GA, where she serves as the Director of Programs and Partnerships at the Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition (CGIC) and leads Wellness Programming and Training for the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council. She facilitates resilience programs with various organizations, including the Savannah Police Department and the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System, contributes to grant applications, designs wellness programs, and conducts data evaluation and report writing. Tara holds certifications as a Certified Personal Trainer, Certified Behavior Change Specialist, and Certified Nutrition Coach, and has received training in the Community Resiliency Model, Mindful Self-Compassion, and Trauma-Informed Weightlifting. She is also pursuing her 200-hour yoga teacher certification. Tara earned a Bachelor of Health Science from Georgia Southern University and a Master of Public Health from Liberty University. Above all, her most fulfilling role is being a mother to her teenage daughter.

Living Authentically in Recovery: The Power of Community

FEATURED WRITER : Jody Bogle



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“How can we live our best authentic lives if we have to hide who we are?” – Chetana M.

Authenticity is at the heart of recovery. It’s about embracing who we are, finding belonging, and rewriting our stories without fear or shame. In this blog, we are spotlighting some of the inspiring voices of the [Georgia Recovers Community Impact Committee \(CIC\)](#)—nine remarkable individuals who embody resilience, advocacy, and the power of community.

Their journeys remind us that recovery is not just about overcoming challenges; it’s about building connections, reclaiming identities, and finding spaces where we can be seen and valued. Whether through faith, family, or the unwavering support of those who truly understand, these stories illustrate that recovery is real—and that no one has to walk the path alone. In this month’s Power of Healing blog entry, Jody Bogle from Georgia Recovers, celebrates these champions of recovery, their courage, and the impact they are making across Georgia.

“Honored” is the first word that comes to mind when I think about what it’s like to collaborate with the incredible members of the [Georgia Recovers Community Impact Committee \(CIC\)](#). These six individuals below represent the fullness of Georgia’s robust recovery community – from those with lived experience to staunch advocates. Serving on the CIC may not be their full-time gig, but they give it their all. From providing invaluable feedback on campaign content, to planning and hosting webinars, these local superstars exemplify the power of community collaboration. When you get to know them and learn their stories of healing and recovery, you’ll become a fan too.

Rather than simply writing about their journeys, I wanted to let their voices speak for themselves. Throughout this blog post, you’ll find direct quotes from CIC members. Their words are more powerful than anything I could write, and we invite you to read their testimonies firsthand.

Just one person can make a difference in someone’s recovery journey. While [Keya](#) has faced judgement for her substance use disorder (SUD), she’s also felt genuinely seen by others and those compassionate interactions have gotten her where she is today.

“There were some church members who turned their nose up when I walked by. But there were some—it was one lady, and she just came up to me and said, ‘Can I pray for you?’ She grabbed my hands. And that felt like that was some genuine love. And she prayed for me. To have that love, just to have people that understand where we’ve been, is amazing.” - Keya



Keya





Jimbo

Jimbo was told it would not be possible to live out his recovery journey in his hometown, but his faith helped him defy expectations and he now serves this same community in his work every day. He reminisces on the naysayers,

"I can remember when I came home from my fourth and final incarceration. I was kind of counted out from the go—from the jump, you know? And everybody was worried about me coming back to my hometown and like,

'You're never going to be able to do this out here.' But that wasn't what I was feeling on the inside. I was just going to do the next right thing. And as long as I'm pleasing God, then...that's between them and God. And that just released so much pressure off of me...and allowed me to get out and, really start this new journey...that I'm on now." - Jimbo

For Chetana, finding community connection was key to her recovery. She mentions,

"They ticked these boxes for me that was – made it feel like I was finally becoming something that I never ever felt in my entire life before. And that's being a part of something, a part of the community. I cannot tell you how many times I've heard other people's stories and that one congruent line runs through all of them." - Chetana



Chetana



Heather

Heather describes her journey to rebuild her relationship with her son. She states,

"I can remember the last place that I went to get sober again. I remember getting my call schedule and calling him immediately to let him know the days and times that I could receive a phone call from him and it not being a priority for him. And I think that is when I realized just how damaging it had been, how absent I'd been. Because he didn't, he didn't want to call me,

and he had every right to feel that way. And so, I was able to accept that, that—this is when I finally sustained long term recovery—and I was able to start seeing my part in a lot of things. And so I just sort of left the ball in his court. And as time went on and he could see that Mom wasn't coming back just to leave again, because that's what I did for years. When he could finally trust that I actually sustained recovery is when we were able to start mending our relationship." - Heather

Mother and daughter, Cathy and Catherine, show that recovery can be a family matter. Catherine states:

"We were always doing the best we could with what we had. And what we had was not healthy. So, this has been, I mean, this has been a journey...we've been learning each other. That can be difficult at times. It can be amazing at times. It's just kind of ebbs and flows, you know?"



Cathy and Catherine



(cont.) **“We’ve been learning how to grow together and, like, let each other have their own pathway. And, dude, the laughing is hands down my favorite, because I always had this overwhelming joy just with the life that I have today. But I didn’t know I had that from my mom until she got in recovery. And then I was like, dang, that’s where all my loudness, laughter, just being me—it all come from my mom. But we never knew that because we were never in recovery.”** - *Cathy and Catherine*

The stories shared by the Georgia Recovers Community Impact Committee (CIC) highlight the Power of Healing—not just in overcoming challenges but in embracing authenticity, building meaningful connections, and creating a future filled with hope. These community champions remind us to live out loud authentically and that recovery is possible, regardless of age or personal history. Most importantly, they remind us that community connections are what sustain us. I’m so grateful I got a front-row seat for this season of their journey, and I hope their stories inspire others to embrace the power of recovery and belonging. By understanding the deep-rooted connections between trauma and addiction, we can foster more compassionate, effective approaches to recovery—helping individuals heal and thrive.

Resources on Trauma, Recovery, and Addiction

For those interested in learning more about the connection between trauma, addiction, and recovery, here are several valuable resources:

- **Childhood Trauma and Substance Use Disorders: Breaking the Cycle:** This blog from the Council on Recovery highlights how childhood trauma can rewire the brain, increasing vulnerability to Substance Use Disorders (SUDs). However, trauma-informed care and community support can help individuals heal and build resilience.
- **Georgia Council for Recovery:** Georgia Council for Recovery (GC4R) is a statewide advocacy and support organization dedicated to enhancing recovery services for individuals impacted by SUDs. It focuses on policy advocacy, workforce development, and community engagement to strengthen recovery ecosystems across Georgia.
- **Georgia Recovers** is an evidence-based public health campaign aimed to reduce the prejudice and judgement associated with SUDs in Georgia. The campaign is brought to you by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) and builds off the pivotal work of the Georgia Council for Recovery.

- **Neuroscience and Trauma Recovery:** Research from the National Library of Medicine explores how trauma impacts brain function and how targeted therapies, such as mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral interventions, can aid in SUD recovery.
- **Recovery and Support | SAMHSA:** This SAMHSA resource emphasizes that recovery is a lifelong journey built on health, home, purpose, and community. It highlights key principles such as person-centered care, peer support, and trauma-informed approaches, providing evidence-based tools and resources for individuals, families, and providers.
- **Resilience as a Protective Factor in Recovery:** Studies highlight the role of resilience in mitigating the effects of childhood trauma. Community support, positive coping strategies, and access to mental health services contribute to better recovery outcomes.
- **The Link Between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Substance Use Disorders** This blog from AFMC highlights research that shows individuals with high ACE scores are at greater risk for SUD. Addressing trauma through early interventions and supportive environments can significantly improve recovery outcomes.

Author’s Bio: This blog post was curated by Jody Bogle, MPH, a Senior Director of Community Engagement for the National Stigma Initiative at Shatterproof, using the stories of lived experience from Community Impact Committee (CIC) members of the Georgia Recovers campaign, that were collected and produced by GA Recovers program staff at Shatterproof including: Annie Blum, Asha Carroll, Ashley Narvaez, Dayanna Cespedes, and Jayla Head.

Georgia Recovers is an evidence-based public health campaign, developed by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, and built upon the foundational work of the Georgia Council for Recovery.



From Hurt to Healing: How Two Women Transformed Their Trauma into Resilience

FEATURED WRITERS : Heather Flowers & Amanda Manard



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Content Warning: This blog post contains references to child sexual abuse, sexual assault, trauma, and suicidal ideation. If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available. In the U.S., call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline anytime, or contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673).

Trauma leaves invisible wounds, but healing is possible—and often, it begins when we feel safe enough to speak out. In this installment of our Power of Healing blog series, we share the powerful stories of two women—Heather Flowers and Amanda Manard—who transformed their deepest pain into purpose. As survivors of sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, and mental health struggles, their individual journeys reflect courage, resilience, and the strength it takes to reclaim your voice. Their stories are raw, real, and full of hope. We are honored to share them in the spirit of breaking silence, building community, and reminding others: you are not alone.

From Trauma to Triumph: How I Discovered Life After Trauma

By Heather M. Flowers

The word trauma comes from the Greek word meaning “wound,” “hurt,” or “defeat.” As a survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence, I know these meanings all too well. I’ve felt anxiety rush through my body, leaving me constantly guarded. I’ve endured flashbacks and nightmares. I’ve experienced years of emotional numbness, depression, and avoidance—times when I truly believed there was no way out.

My story begins in 1982, the year that changed everything. I was seven years old, thriving with a loving family and a strong circle of friends. That year brought change—we moved to a new home in the country, full of promise and adventure. A new school, new friends, and new opportunities awaited. What started as a season of excitement quickly became clouded by confusion, fear, and pain.

In the midst of so many transitions, I never imagined I’d become the victim of sexual abuse—especially not by someone I called “grandpa.” That trauma became the root of so many choices I made during the most vulnerable stages of my life. For 21 years, I carried the weight of feeling dirty, ashamed, and emotionally hollow. I didn’t tell a soul in my family until I was 28 years old.

For years, life felt unbearable. I struggled with low self-esteem, shame, and depression. I blamed myself. The pain was endless—until I finally faced it. I was sitting in a staff meeting when we reviewed a case involving a seven-year-old girl who had been sexually abused by her uncle. The similarities hit me like a truck. I froze. Then something inside me shifted from shock to survival. Before I knew it, I was pouring out my pain to a coworker. Thank God she knew what to do. Within an hour, I was connected to the right resources—and that’s when my healing began. That moment changed my life. It steered me toward counseling and eventually trauma therapy. I was finally on a path to healing, to becoming resilient, and to reclaiming my power.



On July 1, 2020, I joined **Magnolia House**, a shelter for battered and abused women and children, as a Legal Advocate. I had always wanted to work with survivors, but the timing hadn't been right—at least not until after I underwent trauma therapy in 2018. My role at Magnolia House gave me the chance to offer others what I had once needed most: hope, healing, and transformation. Here, survivors receive emotional support, legal guidance, and life skills that help rebuild their futures.

As a survivor of both sexual assault and domestic violence, I understand this work on a personal level. I've walked through the fear, shame, and silence and I know the emotional toll of reliving trauma while seeking justice. And I've learned that communication and empathy are the cornerstones of a thriving survivor. Working alongside leaders and experts in the field of interpersonal violence has empowered me to speak openly about my journey—and to feel confident in the work I now do.

My mission is clear: to live resiliently, lead with empathy, and use my lived experience to uplift others. I want to empower survivors to rediscover themselves—to find their strength, their voice, and their purpose beyond the pain. Through this journey of healing, I have triumphed over trauma. And in that victory, I've discovered a deep sense of meaning, satisfaction, and peace.

Healing from Past Trauma: My Journey to Resilience

By Amanda Manard

Before I can talk about my journey to resilience, I have to start with my past trauma. When I was 18, a month into my freshman year of college, I was raped by someone I barely knew. I didn't fully realize or accept what had happened until months later. At first, I blamed myself—something that can happen with dissociative amnesia, or repressed memories. The memories resurfaced months after the assault, and I fell into a deep depression and began taking antidepressants. Even then, I didn't truly begin to process the trauma until years later.

Fast forward to age 26—eight years from the very month the assault occurred, in September, I began experiencing 10 to 20 seizures a day. After countless hospital visits and no clear answers, my husband, Ryan, and I ended up at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville. A 24-hour EEG showed nothing abnormal, and the neurologist wasn't surprised. He shared that 60% of his patients were women like me—whose symptoms were linked to past trauma. He recommended therapy and sent us home with resources.

A year later, I scheduled an emergency therapy session. My anxiety and depression had escalated, and I felt suicidal. My dad drove me to the

appointment, and I still remember his face when the therapist told him all pills and guns had to be removed from our home. The next day, I met with my primary care doctor and admitted I had a plan to overdose. She calmly informed me I needed to go to the ER—and initiated a 10-13, Georgia's process for involuntary mental health evaluation. My dad took me straight to the emergency room and I answered yes to questions I never thought I'd hear myself answer—like whether I had a plan to end my life. That night, I was admitted to the hospital, but the following day, something shifted. I accepted that I was there for a reason. I embraced the support offered, knowing I wouldn't be there forever. I met others with experiences like mine. I'll always remember the people, the Braves games, the moments outside, and even the best mac and cheese I've ever had. Those memories are part of my healing.

I've had several therapists over the years—strong, godly women who walked with me through some of the hardest parts of my healing. One recommended the book *Healing the Wounded Heart* by Dan Allender. I can't recommend it enough. He explains the lasting effects of sexual abuse but also offers hope. Therapy gave me the space to reclaim my story. I went from blaming myself to calling myself a survivor. I was finally able to say, "I was raped," and not fall apart. That moment was freeing. It no longer defined me.

I used to be a 5th-grade teacher, and I loved my students. But in 2023, I felt God calling me away from the classroom. It didn't make sense at the time—I had a teaching degree and thought it was my path. But one of my therapists helped me see that closing one chapter doesn't mean the story is over. In April 2024, I stepped into a new role as Coalition Coordinator for Resilient Communities of Southwest Georgia, a program of the [Vashti Center](#). We promote trauma-informed training and increase awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), mental health, trauma, and resilience across our nine-county region. I've had the opportunity to share parts of my story with the communities we serve.

The last few years have been filled with challenges, but also growth. My story of resilience didn't come easily—it was a journey. In a strange way, the seizures became a blessing. They woke me up to the trauma I had buried, and they set me on a path toward healing. Therapy and self-care have been essential, and I encourage anyone reading this to make space for both. Whatever you're going through, you can overcome it. You are not alone. And as Philippians 1:6 reminds me, "I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished."



Final Reflections: The Shared Power of Storytelling

Both of these stories reveal that while trauma can leave deep and lasting wounds, it does not define the whole story. Through years of silence, physical and emotional suffering, and ultimately the courage to seek help, these women found their way to healing. Therapy, community, and faith became lifelines—tools that helped them rewrite their narratives from victims to strong, resilient survivors. Their experiences remind us of the profound mind-body connection and the transformative power of speaking our truth. Most of all, they show how healing can spark purpose—turning personal pain into advocacy, service, and hope for others. These incredible women transformed their pain into purpose, showing that healing is not only possible, but powerful. Their journeys remind us that trauma doesn't get to write the final chapter—healing does.

You Are Not Alone: Resources for Healing and Support

Heather and Amanda's stories remind us that while the journey through trauma is deeply personal, healing can't happen alone. Below are resources mentioned in their stories, along with additional tools and services that can support your journey toward healing and resilience.

Immediate Support

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text **988** anytime for free, confidential mental health support.
- **Georgia Child Abuse & Neglect Reporting Line:** Call **1-855-GA-CHILD (1-855-422-2445)** for 24/7 support.
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline:** Call **1-800-656-HOPE (4673)** for 24/7 support and resources.

Local & State Resources

- **Childrens Advocacy Centers of Georgia:** Call 1-866-363-4842 to report suspected abuse and get support.
- **Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (GNESA):** Call 1-800-656-HOPE to connect with your local Sexual Assault Center in Georgia.
- **Positive Childhood Alliance (PCA) Georgia Helpline:** Call 1-800-244-5373 for support and connection to appropriate community resources. Bilingual (Spanish/English) call center is open Mon-Fri from 8am-7pm.
- **Waycross Family Justice Center:** Call 912-490-8989 or visit 2201 Riverside Ave, Waycross, GA 31501

Additional Resources for Healing and Support

- Read:
 - [Healing the Wounded Heart](#) – Dr. Dan Allender
 - [The Body Keeps the Score](#) – Dr. Bessel van der Kolk
 - [What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing](#) – Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Bruce D. Perry.
- Watch:
 - [The Conversation Around Sexual Assault](#): A powerful TED Talk series offering education, awareness, and survivor stories.

Author's Bio: Heather M. Flowers is a native of Waycross, Georgia, with over 20 years of experience in court, victim, and offender services. She holds an Associate of Applied Science in Business Administration from Waycross College and began her career with the Georgia Department of Corrections. Heather has held various leadership roles, including Department Director of Ware County Probation and Chief Probation Officer at Satilla Probation Management Services. She later served as Fatherhood Agent and Parental Accountability Court Coordinator with Georgia's Division of Child Support Services, launching a new accountability court program in the Waycross Judicial Circuit. In 2020, she joined Magnolia House as Legal Advocate and was promoted to Family Justice Center Site Coordinator. Since 2021, she has worked with Resilient Georgia through the Waycross Area Resilient Georgia Partnership. Heather is an active member of the Waycross Judicial Circuit Domestic Violence Task Force and the Brantley County Sexual Violence Task Force.

Author's Bio: Amanda Manard is the newest team member of the Resilient Communities of SWGA coalition. Amanda received her bachelor's degree from Berry College in 2017, double majoring in Early Childhood Education and Spanish. She received her master's degree from Georgia Southern University in Curriculum and Instruction in 2023. She is a former teacher, having taught for seven years. However, her passion for raising awareness for mental health and for advocating for children and their families peaked her interest to change careers and to come to Vashti. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her husband, friends and family, reading, and cheering on the Seminoles!

From Pain to Purpose: A Family Lawyer's Journey of Healing and Hope

FEATURED WRITER : Casey Tuggle



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://www.resilientga.org)

May is often painted in soft pastels and warm sentiments—brunches, blooming flowers, and heartfelt tributes to mothers. But for many, this month brings more than celebration; it stirs complex emotions, unearths painful memories, and reminds us of the relationships that didn't offer the safety or love we needed. Mother's Day can be a difficult time for those whose experiences with motherhood—whether as a child, a parent, or both—have been marked by loss, trauma, or absence. In this blog, one family lawyer shares her deeply personal journey of navigating a painful childhood, finding healing, and transforming her experience into purpose and hope for others. Casey Tuggle's story is a reminder that even the most painful beginnings can give rise to powerful new chapters.

A Childhood Shaped by Trauma

May has always been a complicated month for me. While the world around me fills with flowers and brunch menus, greeting cards, and commercials praising the women who gave us life, I find myself confronting memories I wish I didn't have. For many, Mother's Day is a day of joy, gratitude, and celebration. But for those of us with a history shaped by pain rather than comfort, it can be a difficult day—a reminder of wounds still healing.

My story starts in that very space—between love and loss, protection and pain. My parents divorced when I was just a baby. For years, my mother had primary custody of me. She carried her own burdens—unhealed trauma, mental health challenges, and addiction—that shaped the way she mothered, or often, didn't. My childhood was marked by emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and a deep, haunting sense that I was worthless. The voices that surrounded me became internal: *You're nothing. You shouldn't have even been born.*

As a preteen, I found the courage to confide in my father. I still remember the fear in my voice, the tears in my eyes, and the aching hope that things could be different. Thanks to a compassionate family lawyer willing to push the bounds of a father's rights in a rural courtroom, they were. My father fought for me, and ultimately, he was granted sole custody. I could finally breathe.

But this newfound sense of safety didn't erase the scars. Leaving my younger brother behind was a pain I carried for years. The guilt, the grief, the sense of abandonment—it all lingered. Healing wasn't a straight line. It took years of therapy, broken relationships, tears, forgiveness, and learning how to love myself in a world that had taught me I didn't deserve it.

Turning Pain into Purpose

Somewhere along the way, I realized that my past was quietly shaping my future. I went to law school, not just to practice law, but to advocate for children and families caught in the same storm I had lived through. Today, I'm a family lawyer. I handle divorces, custody modifications, adoptions, prenups—you name it. But at the heart of it, I help people navigate one of the hardest seasons of their lives. I help them protect their children. I help them find peace. I help them heal.

Every client that walks through my door reminds me of my own story. When I hear a voice trembling in court, I remember mine. When a parent finally stands up and says, *enough*, I remember my father. And when a family breaks apart with the hope of building something safer and healthier, I remember that healing is possible—even if it starts with heartbreak.



Redefining Mother's Day and Looking Ahead

Mother's Day still makes me pause. There are years I've felt angry, bitter, heartbroken. But in recent years, I've come to see that Mother's Day isn't just about my mother—it's about all mothers. It's about the women who step in when others step out. It's about aunts, grandmothers, teachers, foster moms, mentors, and friends who embody what motherhood should be: nurturing, protective, compassionate, and deeply loving. I'm surrounded now by those kinds of women. They remind me what this holiday can truly mean. They reignite my belief that motherhood, in its truest form, is something sacred—and something I look forward to one day sharing with my own children. That thought, more than anything, fills me with hope.

I know now that my journey—while painful—was also powerful. It prepared me to be a warrior for others. It gave me empathy, grit, and a fire that won't go out. So, while I'll probably always carry a little ache in May, I also carry something else: purpose.

To anyone else navigating Mother's Day with a heavy heart, know this—your story doesn't end in pain. It can become your purpose. It can become your power. And you are never, ever alone.

Resources for the Journey

As a family lawyer at her firm, [The Law Office of Casey Tuggle](#), Casey sits with clients in some of their most vulnerable moments—navigating divorce, custody battles, or the aftermath of abuse. Many are searching not only for legal guidance, but also for emotional support and hope that life can feel whole again. The following resources offer comfort, clarity, and practical guidance for anyone on a similar journey toward their own healing. Whether you're walking through a separation, processing childhood wounds, or supporting someone you love along this difficult path, we hope they bring you a sense of clarity, strength, and comfort.

Books

- [Crazy Time: Surviving Divorce and Building a New Life](#) by Abigail Trafford
- [Mother Hunger: How Adult Daughters Can Understand and Heal from Lost Nurturance, Protection, and Guidance](#) by Kelly McDaniel
- [Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends](#) by Bruce Fisher & Robert Alberti
- [The Divorce Survival Guide](#) by Calistoga Press
- [Untamed](#) by Glennon Doyle

Podcasts

- [Divorce and Beyond](#) with Susan Guthrie
- [The Divorce Coach](#) (Spotify)
- [The Divorce Recovery Podcast](#) (Apple)
- [The Empowered Divorce Podcast](#) (Apple)
- [The Smart Divorce](#) (Spotify)

Author's Bio: After working for a family law attorney in her hometown of Thomasville, Georgia, Casey's passion for helping families was ignited. After graduating from the University of Georgia, Casey officially began her legal career by joining one of the largest plaintiffs' firms in the country, where she helped countless clients obtain favorable results after experiencing disastrous accidents. Upon graduating from law school and passing the bar exam, Casey dove headfirst into the practice of law by opening her own firm almost immediately—an uncommon move for a new attorney. Why? Because Casey's purpose and passion required redefining the traditional attorney-client relationship. Her representation begins with effective communication, clearly defined goals, and building trust—without breaking the bank. Casey and her team handle a wide array of family law matters including divorce, child custody and support issues, modification and enforcement actions, adoptions, guardianships, grandparent rights, and more. In recognition of her client-centered approach and legal expertise, her firm was voted Best Family Law Firm in Georgia in 2024. Casey is active within the Savannah community, most notably through her work as a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), advocating for foster children navigating the juvenile justice system. She also serves on the board of [Brightside Advocacy](#), the nonprofit that houses CASA in Savannah.

Transforming Grief into Impact: The Origin of MentalFit

FEATURED WRITER : Derrick McElroy



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://www.resilientga.org)

MentalFit is more than just a mobile app—it's a deeply personal mission turned into a powerful platform for whole-person mental wellness. Founded by Georgia resident, Derrick McElroy, *MentalFit* was born from his own grief after the tragic loss of his mother to suicide. Driven by a promise to turn pain into purpose, Derrick combined his lived experience, years of therapy, and nonprofit leadership to design a tool that meets people where they are. *MentalFit* integrates emotional, physical, and social well-being supports into one accessible app—helping users at every stage of their mental health journey, from everyday maintenance to professional care. Today Derrick continues to champion stigma-free mental health support across Georgia and beyond. Continue to read his powerful story of healing and resilience below.

The origin of *MentalFit* goes back a long way—to my childhood. From a very young age, I lived with the reality of mental illness in my own home. My mother had bipolar disorder, and I witnessed her struggles firsthand. There were days when she was full of life and energy, and others when she couldn't get out of bed or face the world. As a child, I didn't fully understand what was happening, but I felt the instability and the weight of it. Mental health wasn't something people talked about openly, and there weren't many resources or tools available for families like mine. We were left to navigate it on our own.

When I was 17, my world was shattered. Just two days after my 17th birthday, my mother took her own life. That loss is something I will carry with me forever. It was devastating beyond words—a heartbreak that left me feeling alone, confused, and full of questions. Why did this happen? Could I have done something? The grief was overwhelming, and in the aftermath, I had to learn how to keep going in the face of incredible adversity.

There came a pivotal moment not long after, one that changed the course of my life. I remember sitting alone in my room, consumed by sadness and anger, and thinking, "I am sick of this pain. I'm going to give purpose to this pain." In that instant, something shifted inside me. A fire was lit—a fierce determination that I wouldn't let this suffering define me or stop me. I wanted to do something meaningful, to turn my pain into a way to help others.

That decision set me on a path of healing and growth. I found a therapist who helped me process the trauma of my past and navigate the identity issues I'd been facing to discover my path forward. Over time, I completed dozens of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) sessions, which helped me work through the trauma. It wasn't easy. Healing rarely is. But step by step, I started to find clarity and strength.

Around this time, I was introduced to a mental health nonprofit advocacy group. They were forming a junior board of directors to engage younger people in their mission, and I saw this as the perfect opportunity to channel my energy into something positive. I volunteered to help lead the creation of this group, bringing together other young adults who were passionate about mental health advocacy. We worked to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and build support networks for people in need.

That experience opened even more doors. I began collaborating with addiction treatment centers, helping individuals and families navigate the often complex and fragmented mental health system. I saw up close how hard it could be for people to access the care they needed—whether because of stigma, cost, or a lack of clear pathways to support. I learned that the system wasn't designed with the individual in mind, and that there were huge gaps in care that left people feeling lost and alone.



Through these personal and professional experiences, one truth became crystal clear to me: mental wellness is a journey, not a destination. It's not about checking a box or reaching some end point—it's about ongoing growth, support, and care. And I realized that what was missing was a solution that met people wherever they were on that journey.

That's where the idea for MentalFit was born. I wanted to create something that made mental wellness accessible to everyone—whether they were just getting started with building healthier habits, maintaining their emotional well-being, or in need of professional support. I envisioned a platform that put all these tools in one convenient, easy-to-use place: right at people's fingertips on their phones. A resource that didn't just respond to crises, but helped people build resilience and stay mentally strong every day. MentalFit is the result of that vision—and of a promise I made to myself all those years ago: to give purpose to my pain and, in doing so, help others along their own mental wellness journeys.

You're Not Alone: Mental Health & Grief Support Resources

If you or someone you love is struggling, please know that help is available. Here are some trusted resources to support your mental wellness journey, wherever you may be:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** – Call or text **988**, or chat online for free, 24/7, confidential support from trained crisis counselors. Whether you're in distress or supporting someone else, you're not alone.
- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)**: Offers resources for suicide prevention, postvention support for loss survivors, and ways to connect with local chapters and events.
- **Crisis Text Line** – Text **HOME** to **741741** to connect with a trained crisis counselor via text, anytime, anywhere. Free and available 24/7.
- **Kate's Club** -Supports children who have lost a parent, sibling, or primary caregiver by offering peer support groups, mentorship, and creative expression activities—free of charge.

- **MentalFit** – A platform built to help individuals build mental strength and resilience through accessible tools for emotional wellness, habit-building, and support—all in one place.
- **NAMI Men's Mental Health Awareness Month Resources** – Learn more about mental health challenges facing men and boys, and explore ways to support the men in your life during June and beyond.
- **National Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)** - Offers comprehensive guidance, toolkits, and training materials on suicide prevention strategies for individuals, communities, schools, and workplaces.

Author's Bio: *Derrick McElroy is the Co-Founder of MentalFit, a mental wellness platform inspired by his personal journey of resilience and healing. After losing his mother to suicide at 17, Derrick dedicated himself to turning pain into purpose. He has worked in mental health advocacy, collaborated with treatment centers, and helped break down barriers to care. Today, he's passionate about making mental wellness accessible to all—offering tools that meet people wherever they are on their path.*



Trauma in Technicolor: How Netflix's "Sirens" Dresses Up Childhood Wounds in a Pastel Pink Bow

FEATURED WRITER : Nikki Warner



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://www.resilientga.org)

Our July Power of Healing blog dives into the depths of Netflix's newest summer miniseries, Sirens. This show aligns beautifully with our series because it illustrates how storytelling—whether on screen or in real life—can open the door to deeper empathy, compassion, and healing in our own lives. Stories of childhood trauma, in any form, serve as powerful reminders of the truths we encounter daily in trauma-informed care: that behind most behaviors lies a lived experience, often shaped by pain, survival, and a deep desire to feel safe. In this post, Nikki Warner, Regional Program Manager at Resilient Georgia, shares how Sirens unexpectedly mirrored her own healing journey.

Sirens offers a star-studded, rose-colored exploration of grief, childhood trauma, survival, and what it takes to heal. With her hair wrapped in a pastel pink bow and juxtaposed alongside Hampton's elite, is Simone Dewitt (*Milly Alcock*), a young woman whose childhood trauma fuels a strong desire for survival. She sacrifices her Yale education and sense of self for a summer in the Hamptons rubbing elbows with high society as Michaela Kell's (*Julianne Moore*) personal assistant. As much as Simone tries to mask her anxiety and traumatic upbringing with forced, cheerful smiles and Lily Pulitzer dresses, she can't seem to outrun her wounds.

As we know in our work in trauma-informed care, our bodies keep the score and our wounded inner child is always with us, making decisions out of survival to ensure we remain safe, accepted, and loved. This is true not only for Simone, but also for her older sister Devon (Meghann Fahy), who remains in Buffalo as their father's caregiver as his dementia progresses. Devon is navigating her own trauma—trying to hold onto sobriety while under immense caregiver stress. Years earlier, we learn she sacrificed everything to gain custody of Simone, pulling her out of a harmful foster care environment and away from their severely neglectful, alcoholic father after their mother's death.

Beneath *Sirens*' glossy surface lies a raw portrayal of survival for both sisters: Simone isn't healed; she's trying her best to cope the only way she knows how, performing confidence, chasing perfection, and clinging to relationships that promise security, wealth, and ease, even if it means abandoning herself. Devon, by contrast, is unapologetic, unfiltered, and determined to grow. She refuses to be ashamed of who she is or where she comes from, embracing both the light and dark within her. That authenticity is deeply unsettling to Simone, who sees in Devon what she cannot accept within herself. Simone is unwilling to sacrifice the comfort and luxury she has found with the Kells in the Hamptons and would do anything to make that reality permanent.

Trauma-Informed Lens: What *Sirens* Gets Right

What *Sirens* does well is commentate on the blurred line that is healing vs. hiding. It asks, what happens when you attempt to build a beautiful life upon the shaky foundation of unresolved trauma? It reveals how childhood wounds often linger long after the tears dry. They quietly shape our relationships, weave themselves into our self-worth, and drive a desperate pursuit of security by any means necessary. Simone's internal struggles with anxiety and PTSD reflect how trauma can lead us to superficial healing environments and make us fall victim to emotional manipulation that reinforces instability and encourages avoidance and self-abandonment, rather than resilience and growth.





In my opinion, one of this show's greatest strengths is how it portrays the complexity of its characters. In a classic slow-burn fashion, the writers intentionally peel back the layers of these three women, revealing deeper reasons behind their behavior and inviting empathy from the viewers' hearts, episode by episode. *Sirens* offers an accurate portrayal of human nature; the light and dark, the duality within each of us, and the courage it takes to face ourselves and pursue healing. We find Simone and Michaela are more alike than different and are drawn to each other by a troubled history of mirrored experiences. Their bond reveals how unhealed wounds can fuel the desire for a better life painted with glamour, manipulation, and reinvention, even if that pursuit means hurting each other in the process. Rather than villainizing its characters, *Sirens* paints them with nuance and compassion. It challenges the audience to look through a trauma-informed lens, asking not "What's wrong with them?" but instead, "What happened to them?"

Sirens may be wrapped in pastel hues and picture-perfect luxury, but beneath its surface lies a sobering truth: trauma doesn't disappear just because we dress it up. Survival can take many forms—perfectionism, escapism, emotional manipulation, or the relentless pursuit of wealth and status. What makes *Sirens* so compelling is its refusal to cast judgment on its characters. Instead, it invites the audience to sit with discomfort, look beyond appearances, question our assumptions, and recognize that things are rarely as they seem. In a world quick to judge, *Sirens* also challenges us to practice deeper compassion for ourselves and the people in our own lives navigating the lingering impacts of trauma.

When Fiction Feels Familiar: A Personal Reflection

Sirens resonated deeply with me and stirred memories of my own childhood wounds. I saw fractured parts of myself reflected in all three main characters. As the eldest daughter to a sister with a chronic illness, the child of a tumultuous divorce and custody battle, an emotionally manipulative and deeply wounded father, and a mother who always did the best she could—my

early life was shaped by anxiety, instability, and pressure to grow up too soon. Like Simone, I learned to mask the pain of my family dynamics with perfection: excelling academically and caring for everyone else in hopes of earning love, being accepted, maintaining peace, and creating my own safety net. I became a people-pleasing, self-abandoning, high-achieving perfectionist stuck in survival mode, with a deep need for external validation and acceptance. Like Devon, I too felt the weight of caregiving as a parentified eldest daughter, especially for my sister, and it left me emotionally exhausted and unable to set boundaries at a young age.

Throughout my childhood and into early adulthood, I let these past experiences disconnect me from my true self. At 22, I left my hometown in Illinois for Georgia, seeking physical distance to prioritize myself and finally learn how to set boundaries, but even then, I remained in survival mode—searching for security in relationships when I couldn't yet find it within. Like Michaela, I clung to the illusion of stability through financial security and a polished life, only to later realize how much of myself I had abandoned in the process, making logical decisions of survival with my head, over my heart. I realized I had molded myself into what everyone expected me to be, obsessing over doing the "right" thing. I chose to go into a helping profession because that was the role that I always held in my family. I became a therapist, rather than pursuing my heart's desire of a more creative career, like writing.

In my twenties, I was simply going through all the motions and checking all the boxes— Bachelor's degree, check. Master's degree, check. Marriage, check. Successful career, check. Homeownership, check—all while being deeply disconnected from who I truly was. Over the past decade, I've grown, slowly learning to choose



authenticity over perfection and performance, but I'd be lying if I said I had it all figured out. I'm still in therapy, unpacking how my past shapes me and my relationships. I'm learning to trust myself and make peace with the life choices made by an unhealthier, disconnected version of me, while also working towards a life that feels more aligned. Unraveling the life I have created in order to pursue my authenticity has been one of the most difficult things I have ever been through. It's a constant journey, but I know my future self will thank me. I wholeheartedly believe choosing ourselves—fully and unapologetically—is the most radical and courageous act of healing we can make.

What Sirens Teaches Us About Trauma

As someone who works in trauma-informed care, I've rarely come across a show that so thoughtfully and realistically portrays the complexity and manifestation of childhood trauma in adulthood. *Sirens* isn't mere entertainment, it reflects the principles we advocate for: understanding a person's behavior through their lived experience, holding space for both pain and growth, and approaching others with empathy instead of blame or shame. *Sirens* reminded me that healing isn't linear. Sometimes it looks like running, performing, or pretending. And sometimes, it means looking back with compassion at the choices you made as a past version of yourself in an effort to survive. That's truly at the heart of trauma-informed care and resilience. It's not just something we practice professionally—we must also recognize our own wounds, extend self-compassion, and choose to grow into a better and more authentic version of ourselves, despite what we've been through.

Resources to Explore

If *Sirens* sparked reflection or resonated with your work or in your personal life, here are a few resources to deepen your understanding of trauma-informed care and support your healing journey—or the journey of those you serve:

- [AAP National Center for Relational Health and Trauma-Informed Care](#) – Learn about the importance of implementing trauma-informed care to promote healing and resilience.
- [The Body Keeps the Score](#) by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk: Read and explore how trauma reshapes the body and brain—and how healing can happen through body-based therapies.
- [Center for Mindful Self-Compassion \(MSC\)](#) – Research-based courses and resources to cultivate self-kindness, mindfulness, and emotional resilience.
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#): Evidence-based resources for caregivers, professionals, and communities supporting children and families affected by trauma.

- [Resilient Georgia Learning Cards](#): These easy-to-use tools introduce key concepts like Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), resilience, and trauma-informed care—great for personal learning or sharing with others.
- [What Happened to You?](#) by Dr. Bruce Perry & Oprah Winfrey: Learn to reframe the question, "What's wrong with you?", to "What happened to you?"—a core principle of trauma-informed care. This book blends neuroscience, personal stories, and compassionate inquiry.

Additional Tools That Sparked My Personal Healing Journey

- Skill-Based Trainings – [Mindful Self-Compassion \(MSC\)](#) and the [Community Resiliency Model \(CRM\)](#) jumpstarted my healing journey and equipped me with practical tools for emotional regulation, helped me cultivate self-acceptance, and strengthened my capacity for resilience in everyday life.
- Somatic Therapy – Helped me reconnect with my body and release stored trauma.
- Yoga, Fitness, and Dance – Prioritizing movement reconnected me to myself and allowed me to find balance and release stress. Endorphins are magical!
- Writing & Journaling – My journaling practice slowly morphed into poetry and reconnected me to my authentic self. A powerful creative outlet for self-reflection, clarity, and growth.

Author's Bio: *Nikki Warner is an aspiring writer, and passionate advocate for trauma-informed care, mental health, and overall well-being. As Regional Program Manager at Resilient Georgia, she plays an integral role in the organization's statewide coalition-building efforts to increase access to behavioral healthcare and promote healing, resilience, and equity for children and families across Georgia.*

A trained mental health counselor, Nikki has spent nearly a decade working to expand access to mental health support for children and young adults. Before joining Resilient Georgia, she provided direct services to both K-12 students in rural, southeast Georgia as well as college students at Georgia Southern University.

Originally from Illinois, Nikki earned her Bachelor's in Psychology from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and an M.Ed. in Counselor Education with a concentration in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Georgia Southern. Outside of work, Nikki channels her creativity through poetry and dance, teaches trauma-sensitive yoga and fitness classes in the community, and lives in Savannah with her pets, Atticus and Scout.

From "Perfect" to Present: A Back-to-School Mindset Reset

FEATURED WRITER : AAshi Patel



READ-ON-RESILIENTGA.ORG

As we continue our Power of Healing blog series, August marks a special milestone—our very first youth contribution. We're honored to feature high school student, AAshi Patel, a passionate young leader who offers a relatable perspective on perfectionism, pressure, and the journey toward self-trust. Her story reminds us that healing often begins with quiet moments of awareness, the courage to rest, and the decision to show up as we are. As we head into a new school year, AAshi's voice is a powerful reminder that progress and growth is the true measure of success, not perfection.

Did you know that people with perfectionistic tendencies actually show heightened brain activity when they think they've made a mistake, even if they haven't?

There's a name for this: error-related negativity, or ERN ([Meyer & Wissemann, 2020](#)). It's a specific brainwave that activates the moment you sense something might be wrong. In people with perfectionist tendencies, that signal doesn't wait for actual failure. It just fires. You trip over a word, score slightly lower than you wanted, hesitate in a conversation, and suddenly your brain is treating it like a full-blown emergency.

When I first read that, it explained so much. That jolt I'd felt for years, the invisible panic that came with anything less than flawless, finally had a name. I used to think I was just being responsible. Careful. Maybe even mature. But the truth was that it never really felt like a choice to me. It always felt like survival.

All throughout high school, I kept a full schedule: Tennis, concert band, marching band, leadership positions, HOSA, student council, Chick-fil-A Leadership Academy, Youth LEAD Georgia, New York Academy of Sciences

Junior Academy. I pushed for the highest grade in everything I touched. I wanted to be excellent at all of it, and for the most part, I was.

From the outside, it probably looked like I had it all figured out, but inside, it felt like I was constantly treading water, trying not to sink.

I didn't know how to slow down. I didn't know how to say "this is good enough" and truly believe it. Every accomplishment was followed by a lingering voice saying: not quite. Even on days when I let myself rest, guilt always followed close behind. I didn't just strive for excellence, I *depended* on it to feel worthy. It became very unhealthy.

What I didn't see back then is that perfectionism doesn't protect your confidence, it slowly erodes it. It convinces you that your worth is conditional. That if you stop performing, even for a moment, you'll fall behind or become irrelevant.

And that's how it shaped me. I became someone afraid of being seen in the middle of the process. Someone who only felt safe when everything looked polished and in control. I was high-achieving, yes, but also empty. And at the time, I thought that was normal, but it wasn't, and eventually it caught up to me.

In 10th grade, I hit burnout. And I know that word comes with a certain weight, a dramatic connotation, like something that only happens after decades of pushing too hard, or working a high-pressure job, or running on empty for years. Many mistakenly assume that high schoolers can't get burnt out—that age somehow renders us immune to emotional fatigue, but I'm here to say that it doesn't. We can be young and still carry the weight of



unrealistic expectations. We can be students and still feel the pressure mount until it breaks something inside. We're growing up in a culture that praises constant achievement and productivity, starting from childhood. The pressure to succeed, to be well-rounded, high-achieving, and extraordinary, seeps into everything and it adds up.

My burnout didn't look like a sudden collapse, a crisis, or a complete breakdown. It looked like slowly losing the motivation and drive I used to cling to. It looked like losing my sense of self. For the first time, I realized something had to change.

As with most things, there was no quick fix. Healing didn't happen overnight. It wasn't a sudden breakthrough or a lightbulb moment. It came slowly in small, intentional acts of self-trust:

- Closing my laptop at midnight—even though the assignment wasn't perfect— because rest mattered more than a perfect score
- Admitting I made a mistake without spiraling
- Showing up a little less prepared, a little uncertain
- Resisting the urge to edit every sentence or overanalyze every interaction
- Learning how to be gentle with myself— which, for someone like me, didn't exactly come naturally

The hardest part was realizing I didn't want to spend my life constantly *proving myself*. I wanted to simply *be myself*.

That shift from perfection to growth is still a work in progress, but because I embraced it, it has changed everything. I've gone from asking "How do I avoid making a mistake?" to "What can I learn here?" From "I have to get this right" to "It's okay to still be figuring it out." Perfectionism builds a relationship with yourself based on fear. Growth, in contrast, builds one based on trust.

So what does it look like to make that shift?

It starts with awareness. Noticing that voice in your head that tightens when you fall short, the one that panics at any sign of imperfection, and learning not to give it the final say. It means treating mistakes like information, not evidence that you've failed. Letting curiosity take the lead instead of criticism.

It means remembering that growth is messy and nonlinear. Real progress doesn't always look like progress. Sometimes it looks like stumbling forward, unsure and uncomfortable, and trying your best.

Overtime, we start building a self-worth that doesn't rely on applause.

We start choosing people who see us as more than what we produce.

We give ourselves permission to rest and take up space.

To be unimpressive sometimes—and still feel worthy.

I'm still driven. I still care just as deeply, but I don't want to be perfect anymore, I want to be present and whole. More than anything, I want others, especially those who've learned to equate perfection with value, to feel the freedom to let go, to grow without the pressure to perform, to choose themselves even when something isn't finished or polished.

You are not your transcript. You are not your resume. You are not the highlight reel people see online.

You are human. A work in progress.

And the best part is, you're allowed to be proud of that.

As we head into a new school year, it's the perfect time to reset our mindset. Back to school often comes with fresh goals, packed calendars, and high expectations—but it can also be an invitation to choose something different. What if this year wasn't about being perfect, but about being present? About learning and not performing? Whether you're a student, parent, or educator, let growth be the true goal, give ourselves grace along our imperfect journey, and celebrate the beauty that is being a work in progress.

Resources for Overcoming Perfectionism

These resources offer guidance for anyone working to let go of perfection and embrace presence, compassion, and resilience:

- [The Power of Self-Compassion \(Video\)](#) – A brief, uplifting reminder that being kind to ourselves is not weakness—it's courage.
- [The Gifts of Imperfection - Brené Brown](#) – A must-read on embracing vulnerability, cultivating self-worth, and living wholeheartedly.
- [Dealing with Perfectionism – Harvard Business Review](#) – Practical insights and strategies for anyone navigating high expectations in high-pressure environments.

Author's Bio: AAshi Patel is a student, writer, and mental health advocate who uses storytelling as a way to process, reflect, and connect. She writes from her own experiences to explore the challenges many face but don't often talk about openly. For her, writing isn't about having the perfect words—it's about telling the truth, even when it's uncomfortable. She believes that vulnerability can be a form of strength, and that sharing our stories can make others feel a little less alone. Through her writing, AAshi hopes to open up honest conversations around mental health, rooted in empathy, nuance, and care. [Check out her blog on Substack!](#)

Unraveled: Stitching Together Hope After Loss

FEATURED WRITER : Darice Oppong



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://www.resilientga.org)

In this month's Power of Healing blog, Darice Oppong shares the story of her son Judah David's brief but powerful life, and how she found healing through lament, community, and creativity. Her journey is a tender reminder that even in seasons of deep grief, hope can take root—and that none of us have to walk through loss alone.

Trigger warning: This post mentions preterm birth, NICU care, and infant loss.

Hope feels scarce these days. Between negative headlines, hard seasons, and private struggles, it's easy to wonder if there's any reason to keep going. Yet I've learned that hope still exists—often in the most unlikely places.

In April 2023, my world turned upside down when our beloved firstborn son, Judah David, was born premature. Just four weeks earlier, my husband and I were the picture of parental excitement—nervous but eager to begin our family. At what felt like a normal 20-week OB appointment, my doctor said words I'll never forget:

"Darice, we need to rush you into emergency surgery. You have cervical incompetence. Your cervix is dangerously short. You're already dilated and your amniotic sac is bulging. We need to place a rescue cerclage (a stitch to keep your cervix closed until your baby reaches viability at 24 weeks). If you go into labor now, your baby will not survive."

Those words shattered everything I thought I knew about protection and promise. As a Christian, I had grown up singing songs of God's keeping power—lyrics that felt absolute, like "You're never gonna let me down," or

"He loves us, oh how He loves us." But standing in the hospital corridor, I realized I had confused God's love with the absence of suffering. This kind of love does not mean pain won't come, but that we're never alone when it does.

After an emergency cerclage and four weeks on bed rest, I was rushed back to the hospital at 24 weeks. Our son, Judah David, arrived tiny and fragile at just 1 lb. 9 oz. He lived five days in the NICU fighting for his life, but in the end, he passed away.

Those five days were the most agonizing of my life. I had planned to be at his side constantly; instead, I learned the crushing helplessness of watching through an incubator glass as it seemed my prayers and petitions to God were going unanswered. Everyone prepares you to have a baby, but no one prepares you for what happens if your baby doesn't make it.

I believe the greatest thief of true hope and comfort, especially in faith communities, is the decision to ignore, diminish, or minimize the realities of pain and suffering we all face. In the aftermath of our son's death, grief and guilt flooded me. I wondered where God was in the middle of my loss.

In order to survive this season of deep disappointment, I had to take a hard look at my faith through the lens of my reality, instead of pushing it under the rug. As I practiced this, I began to find clarity through the fog—not through one single thing, but through a handful of steady practices.



- First, honest lament. I started telling God exactly what I was feeling—anger, confusion, pleading—without pretending it wasn't real. Prayers that named pain gave me permission to grieve.
- Second, community. A few friends brought meals, sat with me at the hospital, and listened without rushing to fix. Their presence mattered more than any polished answer.
- Third—and most unexpected—I learned how to crochet.

While on bed rest, I had been looking for activities I could do from bed, and crochet became my quiet lifeline. In a way, it became a metaphor for my experience. Everything around me felt tangled like a ball of yarn, impossible to unravel. But after learning a few simple stitches, I realized that beautiful pieces are created one stitch at a time.

The rhythm of crocheting helped my scattered mind find a gentle focus. Making something with my hands in the middle of grief taught me that healing would be slow and steady, but that beauty was still ahead. This experience inspired the creation of my Etsy shop, [Judah David Creations](#), where I share my story of pregnancy loss and resilience while offering handmade pieces in honor of our son. I later partnered with a local hospital to support other NICU parents in weekly groups that whispered, "You are seen, and you are not alone." If you're walking through your own valley, here are a few things that helped me:

- Give voice to your grief—speak it aloud, journal, or pray honestly. Don't be afraid to let it out.
- Accept small comforts—short walks, a warm drink, creative work with your hands.
- Let others in—practical help and silent presence are both healing.

I still wrestle with hard questions, but now I hold them alongside daily reminders of grace: a check-in call with a friend, a finished crochet project, or quiet time with God. Hope for me is not the absence of pain. It's the quiet belief that tending to our reality—relationships, creativity, and the desire to be fully seen and fully known—is what helps us keep moving forward. If my story reaches even one person who feels alone today, let it remind you: your grief is valid, your questions are welcome, and you do not have to walk this path alone.

Resources

- **[Caring Essentials | Trauma-Informed Developmental Care & Leadership](#)** – Offers trauma-informed education and resources for families and providers navigating perinatal loss, NICU care, and grief.
- **[NICU Parent Network](#)** – Connects parents who have experienced the NICU journey with resources, community, and opportunities for advocacy and healing.
- **[Share Pregnancy & Infant Loss Support](#)** – Provides compassionate support for those who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant loss, including local support groups and online communities.

Author's Bio: Darice Oppong is the founder of [Judah David Creations](#), a crochet studio and instructional platform launched in memory of her son, Judah David. Through her work, she supports NICU parents, encourages resilience, and highlights creativity as a pathway for healing. Darice also serves as Operations Manager for Community Evaluation Solutions. She holds a Master's in Organizational Leadership and lives in Conyers, Georgia.



From a Broken Elephant to a Movement of Hope: The Story of The Yellow Elephant Ministries

FEATURED WRITER : Michelle Cope



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](http://RESILIENTGA.ORG)

*This month's Power of Healing blog highlights **The Yellow Elephant Ministries**, celebrating its 10-year anniversary. Founded by Michelle Cope after the loss of her best friend to suicide, what began as a simple yellow elephant drawing to spark conversations about mental health has grown into a movement of hope, healing, and connection. Through community outreach, faith, and the Elephant Love Fund, Michelle and her team support families across Georgia and beyond. Timely following Suicide Prevention Awareness Month in September, Michelle reminds us that every story matters and that even in darkness, the light still shines.*

Trigger warning: Mentions loss of life to suicide.

Ten years ago, I never imagined a simple drawing could become a symbol of healing for so many. The Yellow Elephant was born out of a heartbreaking loss that left a silence too heavy to ignore. My dear friend Christina died by suicide in 2012. Three years later, on October 12, 2015, while sitting in a Walmart parking lot, I had a revelation that changed everything. It was as if God whispered, "The elephant in the room is there, but nobody wants to talk about it."

That day, I went home and drew the yellow elephant that now lives on decals, tattoos, and in hearts across the country. What began as one drawing to honor Christina's life became a ministry built on the belief that no one should ever feel like a burden, and that every story truly matters.

The first few years were small but meaningful – a handful of decals, conversations in coffee shops, community talks, and prayer circles. People opened up about their losses, struggles, and silent battles. We cried together, prayed together, and started breaking the stigma around mental health and

suicide. It wasn't organized at first. It was simply love. People showing up for one another in moments of darkness. Little by little, The Yellow Elephant grew roots.

The Reason for the Elephant in the Room

In 2012, my best friend ended her life. Before her death, her family and friends were at a loss and didn't know what else to do. The stigma around mental illness was heavy – it still is. We tried to protect her, but our hands were tied.

Fast forward to the fall of 2015: I was sitting in a Walmart parking lot, thinking about my friend and her quiet love for elephants. She had an elephant in her room that was broken a few days before her death. That detail stayed with me. In that moment, I had a light-bulb realization that I know was God speaking to me.

The "elephant in the room" became clear. Everyone knows mental illness is real, and suicide is a heartbreaking way out, but few feel comfortable talking about it or know how to. The stigma is powerful. People are afraid to seek help for fear of being labeled "crazy" or not taken seriously, often until it's too late.

That night, I drew the yellow elephant with the hope that people would see it and know they're not alone. I wanted it to be simple enough that even a 10-year-old could understand, because tragically, 10 is the youngest age represented in suicide statistics in the United States.



The Symbolism of the Elephant

The elephant carries deep meaning. The elephant in the room represents the stigma – the truth many avoid discussing. The color yellow stands for light and hope. It’s inspired by John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” It also reflects a light-bulb moment – the spark that started it all. The tusks are semicolons, symbolizing that your story isn’t over yet. The different colors of elephants represent solidarity – reminding us that suicide and mental illness do not discriminate. The lack of words is intentional. The elephant is meant to start conversations, not end them.

Where We Are Now

Today, The Yellow Elephant Ministries serves families and communities across countless counties in Georgia and beyond. We’ve walked alongside families not just here at home, but across the United States, in Canada, and even Ireland.

Through the Elephant Love Fund, we’ve helped families facing the unthinkable – covering funeral costs, travel expenses, and counseling support when tragedy strikes. We’ve prayed with them, cried with them, and helped keep their loved one’s light shining through memorial decals.

Over the years, The Yellow Elephant has worked with various organizations, Community Service Boards (CSBs), communities, schools on all levels, and privately with families. Together, we continue to bring prevention and postvention resources to areas that are often overlooked, building stronger and more connected networks of support.

We’ve carried this message from foster parent trainings and suicide-prevention conferences to international presentations. Every time, the message remains the same: there is hope, and you are not alone.

From Pain to Purpose

When I look back, I see how God took something broken – Christina’s elephant – and turned it into a movement of hope. What started in a small corner of South Georgia has become a network of light, reaching across state lines and hearts.

The Elephant isn’t about one person. It’s about all of us carrying the weight together, finding joy after mourning, and continuing to speak the names of those we’ve lost while shining hope for those still here.

Because every story matters.

Because no one is a burden.

Because even in the darkest night – the light still shines.

If You or Someone You Know Needs Support:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** – Call or text **988** for free, 24/7, confidential support.
- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)** – Resources for prevention, survivors, and education.
- **Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL)** – 24/7 crisis support across Georgia (1-800-715-4225)
- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)** – A national hub offering training, technical assistance, evidence-based programs, and best practices in suicide prevention
- **Resilient Georgia Resource Pages**: A curated collection of guides, tools, and informational materials focused on promoting trauma-informed practices, resilience, and mental health for youth (ages 0–26) and their families. Its aim is to help providers, caregivers, and community members find accessible, relevant resources to support resilience and healing across Georgia, including mental health resources for specific populations and backgrounds.

Author’s Bio: *Michelle Cope is the Founder of The Yellow Elephant Ministries, a faith-based suicide awareness and prevention organization based in South Georgia. Inspired by the loss of her best friend and a powerful moment of revelation in 2015, Michelle turned grief into purpose – creating a ministry that helps families and communities break the silence around mental health and suicide. She also serves as a Certified Care Specialist – Parent with Aspire’s IMPACT Program, where she supports families through lived experience, compassion, and connection. Through both roles, Michelle continues to partner with organizations, schools, and communities across Georgia to bring prevention, postvention, and hope to those who need it most.*

The Day My Heart Spoke: A Journey from Burnout to Healing

FEATURED WRITER : Shannon Hervey



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://resilientga.org)

In this month's Power of Healing blog, Dr. Shannon Hervey reminds us that healing often begins in the moments we least expect—when life forces us to pause, pay attention, and choose ourselves. It's a reflection on resilience and the profound transformation that can emerge when we finally listen to what our mind and bodies have been trying to tell us. Through one woman's journey from burnout, we're invited to consider how stress, identity, and inherited expectations shape our lives—and how reclaiming our well-being can become the most powerful act of healing of all.

"Reach for the moon, and even if you miss, you'll be amongst the stars."

My mother used to tell me that all the time. I didn't realize until I nearly lost my life that she wasn't just talking about ambition, she was talking about survival.

My mom worked her entire life as a cashier, never earning more than \$4.35 per hour, yet her work ethic and professionalism were unmatched. I watched her go to work while sick, push through long hours without complaint, and still find time to cook home-cooked meals, attend school programs, and chauffeur us to every activity imaginable.

She was my *shero* — the embodiment of quiet strength — and she believed I could be bigger, better, and more. So, when she encouraged me to take typewriting and shorthand in high school ("at least you'll qualify to be a secretary and earn a good living"), I listened. Imagine her joy when I graduated with my bachelor's degree with honors, and later, my master's. There was no greater cheerleader in my life.

My Mother, My Moon

"Reach for the moon and even if you miss, you'll be amongst the stars." These words became a mantra as I entered the workforce and climbed the proverbial success ladder. From Lead Clinical Social Worker at a behavioral hospital in 1999 to earning a PhD and serving in district-level educational administration roles through 2024, I was, by all measures, a success story. If you think this is the part where everything ties up neatly, keep reading. Because this is actually where my story — and my healing — begins.

The Day Everything Changed

Friday, May 10, 2024

Sigh. I sat on the edge of my bed, exhausted, whispering, "Why am I so tired?" Thank God it was Friday. I dragged myself into the shower, got dressed, and began my one-hour commute to work...there was only eight hours standing between me and the weekend.

Stress at work had reached a boiling point: incompetent leadership, micro-management, bullying, and toxicity that seeped into every corner of my day. My morning prayer in the car was my lifeline to help me make it through the day.

That night, too drained to cook, I ordered pizza for the family and a kale salad for myself. My youngest son and I ate while dreaming about our upcoming two-week trip to England, France, and Spain. But soon after dinner, I was hit with severe gas pains, or so I thought. They eventually subsided, and I went to bed, determined to rest before volunteering at a local food pantry the next morning for Mother's Day weekend.



The Worst (and Best) Day of My Life

Saturday, May 11, 2024

My alarm blared at 6:30 a.m. “STOP!” I yelled at my Google Home clock. As I lay there, I felt the same sharp gas pains from yesterday return, but stronger this time. I went searching for Gas-X. No luck. Then came the nausea, sweating, and dizziness.

Something told me to Google “*What are the signs of a heart attack?*” Out of nine symptoms listed, I had seven. “You’re being silly, Shannon,” I thought. “You’re too young for that.” But something deeper – divine even – told me not to take chances. I woke my husband and asked him to take me to the ER.

At the hospital, my blood pressure looked fine. Relief. But moments after they hooked me to the EKG, I heard, “Go get the doctor!” The doctor entered, reviewed the printout, and said, “Okay, let’s call it.”

I asked, “What are we calling?” She smiled gently and said, “You’re going to be just fine.” I pressed, “No, really – what are we calling?” Then came the words that stopped time:

“It looks as though you are having a heart attack, but we’re going to take real good care of you.”

Minutes later, sirens wailed as I was rushed to the main campus. And just like that...two stents were placed in my heart.

When the cardiologist came to check on me later, he asked, “Your cholesterol isn’t terrible, your blood pressure’s fine... are you under stress?”

And right there, my cardiologist became my therapist.

“You’ve got to find another job,” he said. “Or stress will cause another heart attack, and next time, the outcome may be different.”

The Power of Healing

Over the next five months, I focused solely on healing. Physical therapy strengthened my heart. Behavioral therapy renewed my mind. And God, faithful as ever, restored my spirit.

I learned to prioritize myself, set boundaries, and detach from the toxic narratives that made me believe I had to earn rest, worthiness, or peace.

For twenty years, May 11th had been a day of sorrow. My mother passed from cancer on May 11, 2004 – “the worst day of my life.” But in 2024, that same date became “the best day of my life.” Because I was given a second chance, a literal, physical, spiritual resurrection.

A New Definition of Success

Somewhere between admiring my mother’s work ethic and reaching for the moon, I lost my way. I confused achievement with peace, ambition with

identity. But the power of healing taught me that real success isn’t climbing higher, it’s living lighter. Now, I live with gratitude 365 days a year. I no longer let toxic people or meaningless pressure distract me from my purpose.

As the saying goes, “Only a fool learns from his own mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others.”

So, learn from mine. Take inventory of your life. Release what doesn’t serve you. Protect your peace like your life depends on it – because it does. And if my mother could whisper in my ear right now, I know exactly what she’d say: “We’re done reaching for the moon, baby...let’s just enjoy the stars...”

If this story resonates with you, or if you’re navigating your own journey with stress, healing, or rediscovering balance, the following resources may offer additional insight and support:

- [Chronic Stress and Health in Black Women](#) – A research-based look at how chronic stress uniquely affects Black women and the importance of early recognition and intervention.
- [Managing Stress \(CDC\)](#) – Practical tools to recognize signs of overwhelming stress and evidence-based steps to support daily mental well-being.
- [Resilient Georgia’s Self-Care Learning Card](#) – This infographic offers self-care strategies, stress-management practices, and resources tailored to those working in resilience-focused roles.
- [Supporting Black Women Experiencing Chronic Stress](#) – Guidance for understanding emotional suppression, overextension, and trauma-influenced stress responses, along with strategies for healing.
- [Therapy for High Achievers](#) – An exploration of how perfectionism, overworking, and identity pressures impact mental health, especially for those accustomed to “pushing through.”

Author’s Bio: *Dr. Shannon Hervey serves as the Director of Community Health for the Gwinnett Coalition where she leads initiatives and programs related to improving community health for all citizens of Gwinnett County. Her role includes providing leadership and administrative oversight for the Mental and Behavioral Health Pillar (Resilient Gwinnett) as well as the Health Equity Pillar. Shannon is a distinguished professional with more than 25 years of experience in the Educational, Criminal Justice, and Behavioral Health sector. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) who holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Leadership from Mercer University, a Master of Science in Social Work degree from the University of Texas, and a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work degree from Northeast Louisiana University. Known for her innovative approach and commitment towards supporting the mental health and social, emotional, learning needs of children and adults, she is proud of her efforts which have resulted in positive outcomes for clients, removed barriers to educational opportunities for students, and increased resources that contributed to improved mental health, overall well-being, and wellness. Shannon is passionate about child and educational advocacy, developing communities to thrive, and empowering individuals to live to their potential; she continues to inspire and influence others through her work and mentorship.*

Thank You, Cancer: A Story of Breaking Down and Breaking Through

FEATURED WRITER : Kayleigh Heard



[READ ON RESILIENTGA.ORG](http://READONRESILIENTGA.ORG)

In our final installment of our Power of Healing series, we explore an extraordinary journey of survival, self-discovery, and resilience. At just 26, this month's author received a rare cancer diagnosis under traumatic circumstances, leading her to confront not only a life-threatening illness but also the impact of past trauma, body image, and identity. Through her honest reflection, she shares how facing mortality reshaped her understanding of resilience, deepened her gratitude for her body, and empowered her to advocate for herself in a complex healthcare system.

Disclaimer: Mentions of childhood abuse, self-harm, disordered eating, and medical trauma. If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available. In the US, the number 988 is the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available by phone or text 24/7 in English and Spanish.

Cancer is a relatively common disease in today's world. According to the World Health Organization, one in five individuals will develop cancer during their lifetime. Most of these individuals discover they have cancer via a scan or bloodwork, but at the age of 26, I learned of another way that cancer can be diagnosed, especially if it's growing in your uterus – your body can simply give birth to it.

Throughout my cancer journey, there have been countless moments of suffering. It was terrifying to be in labor with a mass for five days. It was tortuous – and humiliating – to give birth to a tumor in front of an audience of medical personnel. It was devastating to be diagnosed with a rare, aggressive cancer in my mid-twenties. It was heartbreaking to learn the only way to avoid death was to have a hysterectomy before I ever had children. The relentless physical pain I live with daily can be excruciating, and the uncertainty of the future is often petrifying. Being diagnosed with cancer is like being swallowed by darkness, but it's often in the deepest shadows that we discover our inner flame of resilience.

At the beginning of my cancer journey, I would have never imagined being thankful for the malignant cells that turned my life upside down, but

months post-diagnosis, I can say that cancer is one of the best things to have ever happened to me. Only through a brush with your own mortality can some lessons be learned, but by sharing the insights I have gained, I hope that others can find the same peace that I fought like hell to earn.

Survival vs. Resiliency

When you're first diagnosed with cancer, you may or may not know if you're terminal. For the first three weeks after my diagnosis, my prognosis was unclear, and it was in this liminal space that I learned the difference between resiliency and survival. By overcoming the abuse, insecurity, and instability of my childhood, I thought I was the posterchild of resiliency. My ACEs score was sky-high, yet I held two college degrees and a full-time job, but as I sat with the thought of death, a *young* death, it dawned on me that my achievements were not products of my resiliency but rather efforts to continually outrun my past. I wasn't earning degrees and doing well in life because I was a resilient person – I was doing it out of fear, the fear that if I didn't succeed enough then my life would revert to the scarcity and instability I had known in childhood. Letting fear fuel my life meant my existence was built on a shaky, insecure foundation, but cancer demolished that rickety structure, giving me the opportunity to rebuild my life upon a sturdy foundation made of authenticity, gratitude, and the joy of being alive.

Loathing vs. Loving

I had always hated my body. I despised every ounce of fat, each pimple, and all the flaws that shined like neon lights when I looked into a mirror. Childhood abuse teaches you that your body is disgusting, and society will happily second that notion, encouraging you to engage in eating disorders and negative self-talk. My decade-old diary is filled with pages of self-flagellation, convinced that my body was baggage that made me unlovable.



Since cancer, however, it nauseates me to even attempt to think of myself in that light. I had cancer symptoms for over a decade – symptoms that countless doctors dismissed – but those symptoms vanished within days after birth as if my body had decided to treat the cancer itself. And when the top cancer hospital in the nation couldn't explain how my uterus had trapped an aggressive cancer, resulting in a stage 1 diagnosis after a decade of malignancy, it became impossible for me to hate my body ever again because it did the impossible to keep me alive. While I engaged in disordered eating and lambasted myself with endless criticisms, my body still battled cancer silently on my behalf for over 3,000 days. Cancer has taught me that even when I didn't love my body, it still loved me.

Difficulty vs. Advocacy

As a woman, it can be difficult to advocate for yourself. It is far too easy to be seen as “difficult”, “hysterical”, or “attention-seeking”, especially by medical professionals. Even worse, our physical pain is often dismissed as theatrics, leaving us to endure things we shouldn't, such as being in labor with a sarcoma for *five days*. When I first sought medical attention, it was clear that something was wrong. A pelvic exam revealed a severely traumatized and damaged cervix, and an ultrasound showed that in my attempts to avoid a hemorrhage from birthing whatever this thing was, I had actually been pushing the mass through my cervix and *back into my uterus* each time it tried to fall out. Even then, the doctor told me to “keep pushing it back up” until I could see a specialist, leaving me in agony for an additional four days until an emergency surgery was required because the mass had begun to die inside of me, rotting me from the inside out. It was after this experience, an experience that could have *killed me*, that I shed my identity as a passive, acquiescent patient. If I couldn't trust the medical community to keep me safe, then I had no choice but to become my own advocate. Once I received my diagnosis, I read every academic article available on my cancer type so I could participate in conversations with my oncologists, working together to come up with an evidence-based treatment plan. I keep my care team on their toes, contacting them when I'm overdue for my next round of quarterly tests. To become your own advocate does not mean you're a difficult patient. It means you rise to the challenge of navigating a difficult healthcare system.

Resource for Turning Survival into Resiliency

[Creating Safety After Chaos: How to Build an Emotionally Regulated Life Post-Trauma](#) – A clinical psychologist's guidance on rebuilding your life after experiencing long-term trauma.

Resource for Self-Love

[15-Minute Meditation for Self-Love](#) – A quick video to ground yourself in self-appreciation and recognition for the goodness that lives within you.

Resource for Becoming Your Own Healthcare Advocate

[A Doctor's Guide: How To Be A Patient Advocacy Rock Star \(For You Or A Loved One\)](#) – A doctor's advice on how to be heard by the medical community while navigating a health crisis.

Author's Bio: *Kayleigh Heard is a criminologist and writer from South Georgia. Diagnosed with a rare cancer in her mid-twenties, she discovered that resilience isn't about avoiding hardship but allowing it to transform you. Kayleigh is an advocate for women's health and young adult cancer awareness, using her story to spotlight the systemic gaps in care and to encourage others to find strength in their own darkest moments. In her spare time, Kayleigh enjoys beating the odds and spending time with her family, friends, and loving pets.*



Questions or feedback?
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