



# THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE UNDER STRESS

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



JEANETTE WITH HER YOUNGEST SON

## Everything Felt Like a Threat

BY JEANETTE VEGA

Before my son entered foster care, I was working full time and going to school full time. I was on it.

After I lost my son, it was like I lost control over my body and mind. I couldn't focus. I could not keep track of anything. It felt like my brain was not working anymore.

My anger would jump from 100 to 1,000. I was always the type to have my guard up. I was in defense mode. But when my son went into foster care, I went from defense to attack. Everything felt like a threat to me.

### ACT NOW, PAY LATER

At the time, I didn't understand what was happening to me.

Now I know that serious stress can make it hard to think, plan and calm down. When people feel threatened, we get in a "fight, flight, or freeze" mode—we just want to hide, we feel stunned, or we go on the attack.

My "act now, think later" reactions did not help my son come home. No one at the agency understood what was wrong with me, or what I'd been like before.

They assumed that I was always an angry, violent person, and that kept my son in care for longer.

### SEEING PAST THE STRESS

It wasn't easy for me to get myself back together. Keeping my emotions inside felt so hard that at times I thought I would explode. Still, I learned to do it for my son's sake. Here's what helped:

*I let out my pain*—outside of the agency: I learned to wait until I left the agency to vent, cry and scream. Then I did whatever it took to release the hate and hurt I had inside, without hurting myself or anyone else.

*I found someone who listened to me, not judged me*: Feeling alone with so many overwhelming feelings can make you shut down and lose faith that you can overcome obstacles.

*I empowered myself with knowledge*: My anger came from feeling powerless to help my son, so I empowered myself by asking the caseworker exactly what I needed to do. Then I used that knowledge to bring my son home.

## How to Plan and Stay Calm Despite Stress

Interview with Kiran Malpe, clinical director of the Strong Starts Court Initiative in NYC, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

Planning is really important during your case, and there's a part of our brain that plans, organizes and carries out our tasks. But stress and depression can affect our planning. The word "stress" minimizes what court-involved families experience, which is "toxic stress." That's feeling overwhelmed and having no one to help you.

With toxic stress, parent may have difficulty maintaining routine in their life. It can be harder to get up on time, think ahead about travel times, or plan out transportation. I've gotten parents calendars and said, "Let's fill this out together." Professionals just think, "The parent is choosing not to do the right thing." It's very important that parents identify what's going wrong and what's going to help them.

Trauma is also held in our bodies. A physical response is the first reaction. You might not sleep well, have an increased heart rate, the sweats, nightmares, or negative thoughts in your head.

Parents can come in being aggressive, even threatening or hostile. You're activated by what's happening, and once you're in an activated state, it's hard to get out of it.

I help parents take a couple deep breaths and pause. "Grounding" exercises are simple things like sitting down, putting your feet on the ground, your back against a chair, and closing your eyes. Saying to yourself, "I'm planted, I'm present, I'm here right now" and feeling your body in the chair.

I've given parents laminated pictures of their child to keep in their pocket, or stress balls to hold in court, or crystals. A physical reminder can help you stay focused when you're overwhelmed.



KEYNA FRANKLIN WITH HER DAUGHTER

## What Are Your Needs and Goals?

*Interview with Julia Jean-Francois of the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park and Jennifer Lowe of EMPATH's Mobility Mentoring by Rise's Keyna Franklin*

**Julia:** People need to have their basic needs met—and parents need to feel confident that their children are safe—before they can think about other changes in their family lives. We start the conversation with families by looking at whether they have a safe place to live, an income, health care.

**Jennifer:** The coaching relationship can help you take a step back and focus on your long-term goals, and give you support in achieving those dreams. A family might have goals around getting their child into daycare, going back to school, working more. Mentors meet weekly with families to set goals, check in and celebrate wins.

**Julia:** What you really need in the beginning is a coach, like: What's the game plan? What do we need to get done here? What's going to be the first play? Without support to make the plan and follow it through, many parents would feel extremely lost.

**Jennifer:** All of us have goals but get discouraged. Things don't go as planned. We help families set small, reasonable action steps so they don't lose momentum. We also help families strategize: What are the obstacles you might face? How can you plan to use your strengths and your support system to help you? When you work with a coach who helps you see your own strengths, and you start achieving goals, you realize you have control over your life and you have possibilities.

## Therapy Helped Me Take Control

BY MICARLINE LAVENTURE

When I started therapy, I felt like my past had completely destroyed me and my relationship with everyone. I was so ashamed to talk about anything. But my therapist helped me realize how good it would be to let it out, and I did.

She gave me charts to fill out so I could pay attention to when I was feeling angry or confused and learn ways to bring down the intensity. I also began to play with my children. She also gave me logs to write down whether I had played for even 5 minutes a day. I took small steps. I stopped being afraid to enjoy myself.

My daughter used to be so afraid to come to me and would lie to me all the time. But she began to really open up. It felt wonderful when my son started telling me everything about his day.

In so many ways, therapy helped me take control of my life and believe that there is always a way forward. It helped me give my children something my parents didn't give me—the safety, the trust, and most of all, the love I never received.

### TIP

Let your worker know if you are having any of these problems:

- You don't feel safe with the service provider
- The neighborhood triggers you to feel or act negatively
- You don't have transportation to get there
- The time of the service conflicts with other appointments, such as visits

### TIP

It's important that you feel comfortable with any service provider.

When you start, you can ask yourself:

- Was the program welcoming to me?
- Did I like the therapist or group leader?
- Did I feel good there?
- Did I feel safe?

You want to finish services quickly so you can get your child home, but if you don't think a program can help you make progress, keep looking for a place where you think you can grow.

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