



RELATIONSHIPS FOR CHANGE

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



KEYSHANA WITH HER DAUGHTER

I Didn't Feel Loved

BY KEYSHANA MIMS

For the past 11 years I've struggled to break my addiction and be a mother to my children. Crack made me feel like I was on top. When I wasn't high, I felt lonely, confused and separated from the world.

As a child, I didn't feel loved by my own family. I lived in kinship care, and I was molested. Then, as a teenager, I was forced into prostitution. I first tried crack because I'd heard it would make me feel no pain.

For five years, my life was a mess. I lost three daughters to foster care.

TRYING AGAIN

When I got pregnant again, I knew that I needed to get clean and try again with my family. I thought I would be yelled at or blamed. But it was "We missed you!" and the hugs, kisses and love I had longed for.

I was able to enter a mother-child program and I'm proud to say I've learned to cope without using drugs.

Now my daughter and I live in a shelter and I work at the Parks Department. Much of the time it feels like I'm not getting anywhere. Program to program, train to train, walking late in the cold. I'm not saying my life is supposed to get better at the snap of a finger but damn! I didn't think it would be this hard.

Sometimes I feel like a child going through a tantrum. I keep reminding myself that I was willing to do anything for drugs.

STAYING STOPPED

My focus right now is staying stopped. I visit friends and family who encourage my recovery. I feel loved, because when I tell them I can't handle something, they don't throw my past in my face.

I'm working on opening up. On taking the risk to talk to my family about what is going through my mind. What my fears are. Not lying. Because being alone is what led me to use.

From Survival Skills to Coping Skills

Interview with Amelia Franck Meyer, CEO of ALIA, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

Often in child welfare, parents are asked to give up their coping skills. Your coping skills are things that help you get through the pain you carry with you every day. Getting high or other ways of numbing or soothing ourselves are how our brains and body protect us from pain that is too much for us to bear. But they can also put your child at risk.

FACING TERROR AND PAIN

If you're being asked not to use substances or not to be in relationships that brought comfort, you need another way to cope with your pain. You need a replacement behavior. You can't rip off the band-aid and stand there uncovered.

If you peel back your protection without replacement ways to cope, it can be very dangerous. You get into a fight, flight, or freeze mode, and you're flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, and it feels like, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die."

It makes perfect sense from a survival perspective. If those are the ways I kept safe, you're taking my survival away – you're taking my babies, or my ability to cope and stay alive. And the survival response is to feel: "I'll kill you before you kill me." If you have a history of experiences that made you feel that your life is at risk, you get to that more quickly.

WORTHY, RESILIENT, LOVING

Remember: That pain won't stay as strong if you deal with it. Our past never goes away, but you can be in control of it, instead of it being in control of you.

You need people who will walk this with you as you deal with the pain. Building networks of support—people on your side who believe in you—is so important.

Dealing with setbacks and sticking with it is resilience. You can get to the point where you can say: "That shouldn't have happened to me. I am worthy and capable of love." And new things can bring you joy: Seeing your children grow and develop, having a steady job where people appreciate your work, having the keys to a new apartment. Those are enormous! Those feel great.

To My Advocate, I Mattered

BY MELISSA LANDRAU



ADVOCATE TERESA BACHILLER WITH MELISSA AND HER TWINS

Before joining a peer support group, I would walk into the foster care agency ready to raise hell. I was having real concerns about my case. I didn't feel that I was getting the information I needed. I was struggling and had no one to talk to. I wore my anger on my face and didn't think twice about lashing out.

Throughout my life, I have been used and let down and I learned not to trust people. I burned bridges and kept everyone away.

At the agency, no one saw what I was going through, they only saw my attitude. The only person I could turn to was my parent advocate, Teresa. Unlike every other person I encountered in the system and in my life, I knew that to Teresa, I mattered.

Teresa spoke to me in a calm and passionate manner. She understood how difficult it was to be a mom under child welfare's watch and reassured me that everything was going to be ok. She referred me to the right services. She even got me into a crocheting class that help me control my temperament.

Teresa also referred me to the parent support group that she ran. Being around other parents whose children were in care, I found community. I also learned skills. They encouraged me to take deep breaths. They kept it real about what I needed to change. I had to learn that I couldn't always get what I wanted, when I wanted it. Things take time.

The support I received from that group and from Teresa helped me get through the really hard days.

Checking in for Success

Interview with Dana Christensen, creator of Solutions-Based Casework, by Keyna Franklin

Planning should be about asking: How can we help parents have more good days than bad days, and not have any really bad days that make the kids unsafe? That can include a plan for services. You may need to get some services to be the parent you want to be. But completing services is not the goal. The goal is that everyday life in the family can go well most of the time and not go really bad.

Meetings with your caseworker should target what you are struggling with and help you document what you're doing to change. Every time you meet with your caseworker, your check-in should be about why you're going to the services: What did you learn? How have you used what you're learning? What's different in your family now?

We want to help families not just notice what they're doing wrong, but their small steps of change and successes. For instance, you may feel discouraged because you haven't changed a behavior yet but you can notice that you want to change. That's actually a sign of change. So try to notice even little bitty steps. Even a thought about what you might do differently is a change.

Planning for Health and Hope

Adapted from an interview with Katya Smyth, founder of the Full Frame Initiative, by Rise's Keyna Franklin

When we're in crisis and affected by trauma, we can focus more easily on immediate next-steps than on our deep and long-term needs. But some needs are hard-wired in us, so if we're forced to make trade-offs—like moving to stable housing far from the people we depend on, or entering a treatment program where we have no control—we often can't sustain the change. This checklist can help you think about what you need in your life.

- **Safety:** We all are driven to feel safe being ourselves without fear or danger, but what each of us need to feel safe is really different.
- **Basic Needs:** We need to be able to access basic needs like food and shelter without shame or stigma. Avoiding shame is a really deep drive.
- **Connection:** We need people to depend on, and we also need to feel that people depend on us. That can be family, friends, or an organization where you can contribute and you're also helped.
- **Stability:** We all need predictable patterns in our days and our weeks. "Anchors" are tiny little habits that help us function, like drinking coffee or making your bed. Part of being in crisis is that there's so little familiarity in your day, and that's stressful. Our bodies and minds try to find things that are familiar, which can lead us back to negative habits.
- **Mastery:** We all need to feel, "If I work at something, I can change it." If you have no control, and it doesn't seem to matter how hard you work, that affects us. The sense that we have some control and choice to influence what's happening helps us move forward.

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