

Addressing Trauma: The First Step in My Journey to Recovery

By Tonier Cain

About the Author

Tonier Cain works at the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors where she is the Team Lead for the CMHS-funded National Center for Trauma-Informed Care. In this capacity, she provides and coordinates technical assistance on trauma-informed care for diverse systems across the country.

I am a 41-year-old African-American woman who has been in and out of prison multiple times; I am a mental health consumer who's been hospitalized many times; and I have been in so many substance abuse programs, I can't even name them all. Most important, I am a trauma survivor.

During every incarceration, every institutionalization, every court-ordered drug treatment program, it was always the same: I was always treated like a hopeless case. All they could see was the way I looked or the way I smelled. It wasn't until I finally entered a recovery-oriented, trauma-informed treatment program a little more than four years ago—where I felt safe and respected—that I could begin to heal.

As a young child, I had a belief system that I was nothing and that I would never amount to anything. I thought that the men that my mother entertained, who would touch and hurt me, did it because something was wrong with me and I deserved it. I thought that my mother abused me and didn't love me because I was a bad child. My eight brothers and sisters needed me to protect them. I had to keep the men from hurting them like they hurt me, and I only wished my mother loved me enough to protect me.

I spent a long time living with no hope and finding no help in the different systems that I entered. Every time I went into jail/prison, I asked for help,

but I was told that it was a jail, not rehab. When I would leave, they would say, "See you when you come back, we'll hold your cell for you." No one ever said, "I hope you make it this time."

When I was admitted to mental health units, I would be told that I had several diagnoses, and I'd always ask, "How do you know? I've been up smoking crack for seven days." They never allowed the street drugs to get out of my system before they evaluated me. I also went to many substance abuse programs. I was raped by a counselor at one, and others used a "tear you down and build you back up" model, but I was broken down enough already. Even in school, where I was teased because of the way I smelled, no one asked about what was happening to me.

I have also been secluded and restrained several times. I am a victim of neglect and abandonment, and one of the worst things that you can do to someone with this type of history is to put him or her into a seclusion room. When that door was shut, the flashbacks of my mother's abuse and abandonment began. So when they'd come later with a tray of food, I had been triggered, and so I'd push the tray away from me, but then they'd restrain me. They restrained a rape victim, which triggered me even more. I was always over-medicated. It's hard not to lose hope under those circumstances.



Pictured above: Tonier Cain

Then, after 19 years of drug addiction, alcoholism, homelessness, going in and out of prison (83 arrests and 66 convictions), mental health institutions, and substance abuse programs, I finally found the help that I needed to heal. Finally someone asked me, “What happened to you?” instead of, “What’s wrong with you?” I was in prison and pregnant, and I was terrified that I was about to lose another child. I had already had four kids taken from me, and I could not survive losing another child. I was told about a program that would help me heal from my trauma, recover from my addictions, treat my mental illness, and keep my baby with me. Well, I didn’t know how they were going to manage all that, but I knew I had to give it a try. What did I have to lose?

The first thing my therapist said to me was, “Everything that happened to you as a child, happened to you, you didn’t do it to yourself,” and I believed her, because her tone was gentle and not judgmental. Then we began the work, and I had to remember and talk about every time I was touched and assaulted as a child. I talked about my issues with my mother, how she never loved me and never protected me. I began to heal because I started to

understand that I am an adult now, and my mother’s lack of love for me, and the men’s abuse of me, is a reflection of who they are; it’s not about who I am.

Then my therapist told me that we had to start talking about my children, and I shut down. I asked her how I

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could talk about something that gives me so much pain and suffering every day of my life. How do you heal from having four kids walking the earth when you don’t know how they’re doing, what they look like, or who they are? She said, “You do, you just don’t do it by yourself,” and she was there with me, for weeks of crying and rocking, as I allowed myself to remember them and grieve them.

In that program, I felt safe for the first time. The walls had pictures and positive quotes on them. We had our own rooms with nice colors. No one

was screaming “medication time” at us, or secluding or restraining us. I was asked every day, “How are you feeling today?”

Everybody there was trained in trauma, which meant I could talk to any staff member at any time, and they would listen. For the first time in my life I felt like a person, a human being, and not like the monster I had been treated like in the past. I felt hope. Oh, what a difference it makes when someone asks, “What happened to you” instead of, “What’s wrong with you!”

Once I was able to start healing from the trauma in my life, my belief system changed from “I am nothing” to “I am somebody, and I can be anything I want in this world.” All of the earlier treatment and information that people had tried to give me for years was only at the surface, and it didn’t get down to the foundation of my problems and needs.

Since getting trauma treatment in a safe, trauma-informed setting, however, I have been able to heal. I make better decisions. I have a healthy, beautiful child whom I simply adore and who is securely attached to me. I do not have the desire to use drugs or alcohol. I am no longer on medication. I am now an advocate in the streets where I had once lived, used drugs, and was raped and beaten. I am now a national spokesperson on trauma, I am a homeowner, and I sit on several boards.

Five years ago, I was taking hits of crack, was in a mental institution, and was in and out of prison. Then, everyone thought that I would spend the rest of my life going in and out of prisons and mental institutions, or that I was going to die in the streets.

They were wrong!

Where there’s breath, there’s hope, and for me it began with respectful, individualized trauma treatment. ▀