

Tamara Waugh - Chapter - Fixable

Trigger warning\* Sexual abuse and rape.

*Like a fridge, dark, cold, and empty inside. Looking strong and solid on the outside.*

These are the first words I ever wrote in my very first journal when I was around 11 years old.

When I was first asked the question in a recorded interview, ‘When did you first experience depression?’, I stopped in my comfortable, casual tone of self-security. I had never reflected on what age certain dark feelings started to rise in me.

Of course, I knew when I had been first diagnosed with clinical depression in my late teens, but this wasn't the question. I remember the feelings of guilt and shame and fear that sat unshakeable in the pit of my stomach immediately after the first time I was sexually abused when I was 4 years old. I remember the overwhelming anxiety and fear that paralysed my little being that night and so often from that point onwards. Was that Depression?

I recall these very same feelings the next time I was asked to do something inappropriate at 6 years old by this same boy, and again at 11 years old, when more abuse occurred at his hands. I remember these same feelings multiplied from age 9, when I woke to my stepdad leaving my bedroom, whispering ‘Shh’ and pointing at my baby sister in the cot, as he closed the door while I adjusted my nightie from up around my neck. I remember the nightie intimately. As I write this, I remember the smell of it and how the fabric felt against my skin. I remember these feelings and the numerous events that created them, until I was 16 years old.

I used to dream of being a film director and making a film about my horrible double life, which seemed from the outside to be the best childhood anyone could dream of having. I'd imagine inviting my parents to the grand opening, front row seats they'd have and I'd sit by the curtain watching him squirm in his seat. Watch him sweat and feel sick as he learned the enormity of his actions, and the impact they had on my development and human functioning.

In my dream, I'd tear up with relief as my mum registered that this film was about her husband and me. A sort of Shakespeare storyline. She would be so shocked and disgusted that she would immediately despise him, leave him and hold me in her arms, rocking me, telling me that she would never let anyone hurt me ever again; that she would always be there for me and love me first no matter what. She'd tell me she was in awe of me for dealing with this all on my own for so many years; how alone and scared and confused I must have felt for my entire childhood.

Dreams are free, right?

The reality is, for many girls in New Zealand, abused by their stepfathers or mums' boyfriends, our mums don't have the emotional or mental capacity or tools to make these enormous choices. Instead, through fear and overwhelm, they try to minimise the events in order to avoid the suffering. They make us out to be liars. They start labelling us as drama queens. They make out to our extended families that we are mentally ill, unstable, unfit, crazy, over the top, extra

sensitive, the black sheep of the family, all in a bid to justify their own conditioning; to suppress their own trauma and internal turmoil—a battle to crush their own shame, guilt and fear, and eventually pass these onto their daughters. And society gets on their bandwagon, encourages them, guides them to do so, as do doctors, therapists, bosses, lifelong family friends, and siblings. I'm sure there is love there, just not in the way it is needed. They are doing the best they can with what they know. Just as I have done the best with what I know, now that I am a mother.

These feelings followed me around closely, like a cloak on my back, like armour I wore every day. These feelings became me. Or I became them... I spent a lot of my life certain I was going to die at 30 years old. I had dreams about it—it was a deep knowing that I wasn't meant to be here. Life felt like prison inside my body and mind. I was trapped; and no matter how many times I tried to escape, wherever I went, these feelings would always be there. There was nothing I could do to change things.

I don't remember a lot of my childhood. I remember the night times, to a point, and then I am blocked. My mind refuses to let me see what happens next.

When I was young I saw my incessant suffering and debilitating 'episodes' as something I would just have to endure. For a long time, I saw myself as broken, unloveable, unworthy of having the emotionally fulfilling connections that I saw happening around me. This lens of the world sufficiently supported the ideals and narrative that fit with my community best; and so it was, for a very long time.

It's taken a lot of work to shift my deeply embedded mindset. Now, I see life as a human experience, different for each soul that is experiencing it. I look at my life as a gift to be curious about, my character as something to be fascinated with. I place myself always in the seat of the student, open to learning, trusting failure will lead me to a better place and teach me to be a source of good to the world. And when I'm not good, I notice. I pause. I reflect on the things I can change, and let go of the things I cannot. Let it come and let it go. Each and every day.

Depression, otherwise known as 'a major depressive disorder' or 'clinical depression', has been conditioned into our society's belief systems. 'Discovered' by psychiatrists and published in the widely referred to DSM5 (diagnostic statistical manual, version 5) as a 'mood disorder' displaying a number of behaviours, such as feeling sad for extended periods of time, and losing interest in connecting with others, the community, and the world around them.(Jessica Truschel psycom.net 2022) Other listings of 'symptoms' include: feelings of worthlessness, loss of concentration, wanting to self-harm, and significant weight loss or weight gain. It is a common belief that 'depression' is a disease of the mind and is described as a 'mental illness'.

To me, depression is not a disease at all. It's a healthy response to what is going on in our lives; it's part of our biological defence system and our body's way of connecting to our mind to tell it that we need to take notice and do something different. It's a nervous system response—the autonomic nervous system.

Dr Nicole LePera, The Holistic Psychologist, articulates it nicely here in one of her Instagram posts: 'Depression symptoms come from the state of immobilization. Immobilization is part of the freeze response that happens through our Dorsal Vagus Nerve. This is our body's attempt to

help us stay safe (or survive). Immobilization has a dull or numbing effect and makes us feel disconnected. This is by design so that when we are in danger we experience less pain or suffering. Immobilization is meant to be short-term. Life today (and expectations within it) are far beyond how we evolved. Because of this, we can get stuck within this state for long periods of time. With rates of depression skyrocketing it's worth questioning: are people disordered? Or are people responding in natural ways to an unhealthy environment?'

When I told my mother that her husband had been sexually abusing me, she had what was described to me at the time as a nervous breakdown. She didn't get out of bed for about four months and I was one of the only people she would speak to. She asked me what she should do time and time again. I felt this massive pressure to decide her fate, and essentially the rest of the family's fate. I felt all the responsibility had been placed on me. I was numb and definitely not present in the world. I was just going through the motions, wanting to die. My perspective at that time was of a simple equation: remove me and there was a real chance that this family could be happy; that I was the problem, that I was causing the problems. If I wasn't there, they could go to therapy together and I wouldn't be there as a constant memory of pain.

I wanted to get out of Auckland, out of New Zealand. I felt like I couldn't breathe and the world was caving in on me. My parents paid for me to go to London and, for a year or so, at 18—with no social media or internet back then—I lost myself in the distraction of a new city. I got myself a job in a Piccadilly Circus cocktail bar for a year and tried to get a job in film. It was clear I needed a degree so I went back home to get that. I needed to be living at home to afford to go to uni, though, so being back in my highly dysfunctional environment meant that I was triggered 100% of the time. I was in the headspace of, *I want to be with my mum, I yearn for safety and security*. But where I was seeking that safety and security was also the place that felt the most unsafe. So, I partied. And I found meth and GHB. Meth was able to keep me awake during the day and awake all night in case my stepdad came in. I was on high alert 24/7 and living in either dissociation or 'fight or flight'. My second year, I worked on all three year-level films—night shoots, weekend shoots—every single set, I was on and working. My mum pieced together where all my money was going and suggested I go to a rehab centre in the South Island. After an attempted suicide and making a complete mess of every area of my life, I had no choice but to switch tacks for coping.

My number one mission was to get the fuck out of there and back to London as quickly as I could, so I sure as hell wasn't going to fail uni and spend my life in rehab. I organised a therapist and a drop-in recovery centre to support my transition, essentially from one addiction to another. The most they could offer me as advice was to smoke weed instead, every time I had an urge. I threw myself into my work, shut off the contacts that were associated with meth, and survived enough to finish the last six months of uni.

After a few failed attempts at getting film work long-term in London, my self-esteem, negative thought patterns and unworthiness reared their ugly heads in a bad way. I was self-harming a lot, having discovered it was the only way I could bring myself back from dissociation. When my mind and body were in complete overwhelm, and I had no emotional regulation tools, the physical pain was the only feeling I could identify. It was the only thing I could be certain and sure of. This equals pain. This is real. It helped to ground me in the present moment and stop my mind from hurling me all over the past and worrying about the future.

I worked two bars by this time and was snorting cocaine for breakfast. I was selling pills to pay for the increasing amount of bags I needed in a day. As soon as the cocaine wore off, I would plummet into an overwhelming reality and my very deep and unresolved trauma. One night, an Asian guy came to the bar my friend and I were working at. Somehow, we ended up at a strip club with him, along with buckets of champagne and bags of coke. The champagne-cocaine lifestyle he'd shown me was enticing; a very easy way to keep distracted from the shitty feelings that wouldn't leave me alone.

I quickly began dealing for him and was given a driver to come with me and keep me, the drugs, and the money safe. We felt like a good team, and if ever I was partying and too wasted to get home, he'd come and get me and take me home safely. I trusted him. One night, we were back at the flat where we used to cut and bag everything and I noticed a young woman go to the bathroom from a room I'd never even noticed. I asked, 'Who is she and why is she here?' I was told she was no-one, she was just staying here while her boyfriend was in jail. Well, in my extremely arrogant and high state, I wanted to know more. I dismissed my instructions not to go near that room, and knocked on the door. I don't really know what the deal was with her, but she asked if I wanted to try crack, which of course I did. However, I was swiftly uprooted by aggressively bossy men telling me to get out of there.

An hour later, alone with Boss-man, I was to get my first lesson on listening. Rape. There was no point in fighting him and I felt I'd deserved it. I had been warned, I disobeyed. It hurt, and I was upset. I stopped answering messages from any of them for a couple of days and was barely surviving the withdrawal symptoms when I had a knock at the door. Boss-man was pretty upset with me and enticed me back into the game with an explanation that what he'd done would happen again if I disobeyed him. The bags were not gonna get distributed themselves and there were a couple of places he wanted me and the driver to go, he told me, wiggling a big fresh double bag in my face. I snatched it and went along. Considering I'd just sucked someone off for a bag but never got the bag, I was more than desperate.

Some nights later, I was partying after work and quite 'out of it' when I got a text from Driver-man asking if I needed a ride home. He picked me up and as we were driving, I noticed we weren't heading home. Apparently, we needed to do one visit before he could drop me off. I said, 'No I can barely see, I can't go anywhere, please just take me home'. Nope, it was required. We walked up the stairs of a suburban house, with family pictures in the hallway, leading into a living room with four men sitting around getting wasted and watching porn on a very large screen. One of them... Boss-man. I thought it strange we needed to drop to him and immediately felt on edge. I knew something wasn't right but I was so wasted I couldn't physically or mentally do much about it. They racked up a line for me and said ladies first. The next thing I remember is waking on the carpet, naked, with three men on me. I gagged and opened my eyes to a man in a wife-beater singlet, yelling at me, spitting on my face and slapping me. I went from a sudden shock of indescribable pain to nothing at all. Floating in silence watching the things happen around me. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak, I was paralysed. A few moments later, Driver-man walked back into the room, picked up my clothes, lifted me up and took me to the bathroom. He gave me a towel and told me to get dressed.

Everything from then on for a few weeks was a haze. I remember him asking me on the drive home, which was silent apart from this one question, 'How do you feel?' My response? 'Like a slut'. The little trust I had left in men, from that moment onwards, vanished into thin air.

At that time, in my mind, I had deserved it. I had asked for it. Gang rape was never a title that crossed my mind until many years later, in therapy. When I was processing this particular trauma, a journalist friend of mine told me this story sounded like something she'd read recently. She pulled up the article stating a sex trafficking gang had just been prosecuted. Around nine Asian men had been arrested. It showed images of each of them. Right there, smack bang in the middle, was Boss-man. He had been arrested for drugging and trafficking girls as young as 13. Some fifteen years later. My first thought was, *Shit, I'm lucky to be alive.*

### **3 good things**

After an abusive and destructive relationship, I was living with my dad, as a single mum—bankrupt and back in fight or flight. My 30th birthday was an excuse to 'get numb'. I did a very good job of that, ending up in hospital for the weekend due to extreme alcohol and other drug poisonings.

My father brought my daughter to see me. I will never forget the look in her eyes, only 3 years old, and her protector, her safe space, her nurturer, her love, hooked up to this hospital bed. At that very moment, I knew something deep inside me needed to change. I felt her look as the thousands of words and thousands more questions it was. I felt her fear, her sadness, her confusion. What she saw was reflected directly back to me. *Is this who I want my daughter to grow up to be? Is this how I am going to teach her how to be a good human in the world?* No, it certainly was not.

And so The Happiness Experiment was born.

While in hospital, I made the decision to stop all medications I was on for various mental health challenges, and instead find holistic ways to keep myself 'stable'. I remember this decision so vividly because it was a big risk and a big leap. What it came down to was that I had never seen myself through an external view before, and having seen me through my daughter's eyes hit me like a rock. I didn't actually know who I was, or who I had ever been, without medication; without everyone and anyone telling me what I was and just going along with it as my truth. And I needed to find out. The Happiness Experiment was a gratitude practice called '3 good things'—a simple practice of writing down three good things that had happened in my day and posting them on Facebook daily, to keep myself accountable, for 100 days. Doing this practice and sharing it publicly opened up a whole new world of opportunities for me that I never imagined I was worthy of.

Through this practice and the organic virality of it, my life began to change, my perspective on the world began to change, neural pathways changed, self-awareness increased, communication became better, and joy was to be found everywhere in all the little things that make up our day. Good days and bad days, there are always little nuggets of magic to be found. This became a mindfulness practice, as the more I was focused on the good things, the more I was grateful for them in the moment that they were happening, which made me more present in that moment. I was so fascinated by how this practice was having so many internal psychological benefits for me, so I obsessively studied the pants off of neuroscience, habit change, and positive psychology. I was invited to speak at conferences and mentor social entrepreneurs, and I even designed a youth initiative to build resilience in youth to curb New Zealand's youth suicide epidemic. I've now published three lots of '3 good things' journals for people to purchase and do

the practice themselves. I've done countless podcasts and print interviews on the importance and impact of a gratitude practice. To this day, '3 good things' is my number one practice—I'm still writing my 3GT's over 10 years later.

The most interesting response to this practice came from a spiritual healer I did some work with about two years ago. She said, 'Your soul vibrates at a very high frequency for your age and environment. What's your spiritual practice to be at this high frequency?' I said, 'Um, I'm not very spiritual. I've just done a gratitude practice for 10 years and meditated'. She let out a gasp and said, 'Well, that will be it. Gratitude is the strongest frequency raising practice you can do!'. I didn't really know what that meant so, of course, I obsessively studied it—the spiritual path to healing.

An attempt at building some kind of relationship with my mother came about when I was asked to be the face of the HELP Foundation campaign 'Do something HELPful in May', which I was also a board member of. I was to appear on a high-rating morning news television show, speaking on the topic of childhood sexual abuse. My mother saw this as a personal attack on her and her husband and spent many conversations trying from all angles to stop me from doing it. For the first time in many years of attempting to get to a therapy session with her, she agreed to a Zoom session with a respected therapist, as long as her husband could come with her. She brought to this meeting, along with many tears and suffering, a written list of all the things she had financially paid on my behalf throughout my life. As if to say this was more than enough to make up for her husband's actions and her actions and behaviour over the years. Of course, there had to be a transactional element as an outcome for her and this was for me to unfriend a long list of our family and close family friends from my Facebook account so that they wouldn't see anything that was shared about me that could be linked to her feeling any sort of shame or guilt.

A few days later, after going through the list, I decided to unfriend the people I didn't feel connected to anymore or those that hadn't already supported me immensely through my life. This and the nearing media date caused her to unravel. There were hate messages, blame messages, threats of suicide, for an entire week—from my mother and her husband. But these were nothing I hadn't heard already from her over the years. I felt that I had given all of my love, all my compassion, all of my compromise to try to mend this relationship, and there just wasn't anything left in me to fight this battle any longer.

So, after years of considering it and knowing it to be the only option for me to continue to heal and stop carrying the burden of secrets that didn't belong to me, I told her I had given all I could, all I had in me to try to make this work and it was only destroying me further. I let her know I was going to block her on all platforms of communication and then proceeded to do just that. And at this moment, everything I had learned from her from the day I was born, everything I had been conditioned to believe, groomed on how to behave, my entire human make-up came into view. I lay on my bed, closed my eyes, and cried while watching my life play out like a movie before my eyes. I grieved. I grieved so hard. I grieved the loss of my mother like she had died. Like she had never been there; like I'd missed out on the mum I'd yearned for my whole life; like everything she'd ever given me was all a lie. I unravelled everything that had happened while completely unravelling myself.

This state lasted four months intensively and in clinical terms, I was clinically depressed; at some moments, suicidal. But in my being, I was battling a very deep wound, and the only way to heal it was to feel it all. I reached out to my psychologist and friends and thrashed around in my resistance to acknowledging and accepting that I had to dismantle everything I'd come to be, and learn the art of letting go. I meditated for between 4–5 hours every day. Most of this was done in alpha and theta brainwave states, or 'sleep'. I knew that sleep had always been my go-to for consciousness reset and for deeply connecting to my soul. Slowing down my internal system, which was currently being overwhelmed and in complete mayhem, was my mission. I was in a state of paralysis, but I was not numb. I felt everything.

I had always found so many ideas, conclusions and so much peace in sleep. Interestingly, this is one of the most common symptoms of depression. They talk of not being able to get out of bed for days, weeks, or months on end. I had experienced this on a number of occasions throughout my life; but this time, my mindset was not that I was depressed; not that I was unwell, unable, broken, oversensitive, being dramatic, failing at life. My approach and mindset was that I was healing some very deep wounds and I needed this time and this quiet to just sit with the pain, to acknowledge it, to give compassion to myself, to give love to myself, to support myself in what my body and mind was asking for at this time.

The only person who understood this, that I talked to, was me. I astral travelled; I had premonitions of my life to come; I had psychic messages come through for the people closest to me, and although I'm sure most of them thought I had lost my mind (and sometimes I did too), I passed on these messages and they were always spot on. I had souls passing-over come to me to ask assistance in transitioning, and for who knows what reason, I knew exactly what the energy was and what I needed to do. I followed my intuition and did what I thought best and the energy lifted and left me. I knew they were at peace and had made the transition. Then someone would message to tell me of a suicide of a mutual friend and I already knew. I still experience these moments from time to time.

This is a piece of my journal from that time:

*I am deep in my inner world today. Deep in what I know from experience to be deep trauma, possibly even past life karma. I am riding a wave. I am having physical symptoms like earache, stomach pains, headache, random pains shooting through different parts of my body, my internal organs are making growling noises and my mind and mood are low with very negative thoughts.*

*I am not distracting myself from my pain. I am noticing all of the things and sending them love as soon as they arise.*

*It is only now that I'm here that I realise this has been coming for weeks, reflecting back on my behaviour, my reactive nature towards others, perceiving all interactions as a threat to Self, the imbalance in my moods and energy. I see now, all of those were little signs to let me know, there is an up-levelling to come, pain to purge and clear, more to heal.*

*Now that I have done my parenting morning duties, and I am home alone, I have given myself the day off work, closed my blinds, turned a soft light on, got into bed, and put my rose quartz on my heart. I know there is pain to come, and I am willing to look at it. I will let it move through me in all the ways it needs to and I will receive it with all the love and compassion I have.*

*I will remember to not trust the thoughts that come to me today. I will remember to stay off social media and take a day from responding to messages.*

*For the last week when I wake, I can feel my soul rejoining my body and as my thoughts become thoughts I wonder where I went and what it was like. I know from the sensations coming to life in all the areas of my body that it was really good. I know that it was out of this world. I know there was the ultimate peace and love and omnipotent presence. I know it was my special place, that no-one else could ever join me there, and I know I will go back there again tonight.*

*Last thing before I slept last night, my cat came and sat right on my heart, sideways. The first thing when I awoke, my cat came to me again and wanted to get as close as he could to me. I know he feels the energy of where I've been.*

*As I lay here just being with me, I can feel resistance bubbling, I automatically move and shift my body into stretching, arching my back as if between pain and pleasure, like a dog releases anxiety.*

*Immediately feeling the release of emotional pain flow through my internal circuit, I put gentle music on to help it flow.*

*As I go to fill a cup of water to help flush the emotions, I try to remove a bit of food the dishwasher hasn't succeeded in removing from the side of the cup. It falls in my freshly poured water. I know in this instant that I made the right decision to take a day off from life. As I chase the tiny piece of food around in the cup, I know that whatever else I do today will feel like this; I know I must limit my physical actions to the bare minimum. I know I must listen to my intuition. Be still and ride this wave. I know I must stay present and be there for me. Every thought that tries to harm, I must hold my own hand, comfort, and soothe myself back to remembering. I know I must write.*

*I wake to a phone call, I think I feel better, maybe I just needed sleep. I answer messages, three about sexual violence.*

*I remember.*

*I am hungry and shaky. As I'm in the kitchen making food I can't help but notice a sentient being hovering between the lounge and the kitchen. Similar to gas or smoke, it has an undecided form.*

*I remember.*

*I feel nauseated. I exit the room and re-enter, trying to convince myself it isn't there, analysing my sight to try and find fault. When I look directly at it, it's not there.*

*I lay in bed, connecting to my body and heart. I feel my body burning up with heat, all down my arms and down my legs, so much heat. I know what this is, but that doesn't make it less strange and uncomfortable.*

*I am healing.*

There have been many of these moments, or moments that become days, over the last two years. I find whichever piece of me is coming up for healing brings vast and diverse insight to my



work. I find an immense trajectory of self-love and confidence in who I am and why I am here, and it all comes and goes at a much faster rate.

## **EmpowerME**

In hindsight, reflecting on that intense emotional processing time, around my mother and the attachment and abandonment I was releasing, I marvel at the human spirit. I reflect on how at the time I was delivering our first EmpowerME course and how practising what I was delivering meant I was thoroughly testing the course in the moment of its highest need in my life. I was literally practising what I was preaching.

A few years ago, I came across the word ‘psychoneuroimmunology’ and became quickly fascinated by its meaning and any work being done in this space in New Zealand. Psychoneuroimmunology, also referred to as psychoendoneuroimmunology or psychoneuroendocrinoimmunology, is the study of the interaction between psychological processes and the nervous and immune systems of the human body. It is a subfield of psychosomatic medicine. A friend and I were working in the field, me in mental health, system change and systemic advocacy, and her predominantly in nutritional health and the impact of prenatal nutrition and the long-term impact and wellness of babies and children into adults. We had been getting together for wine every so often to discuss the topic, and both complained about the tick box and red tape to design and deliver programmes in each of our fields. After a number of months, we decided to join forces and explore designing a programme together with the freedom to deliver without red tape and content that we knew had worked for us personally and what we had each seen work so well with others.

Exactly one week before our first COVID-19 lockdown, in March 2020, we got together in an office room of Auckland University and nipped out a model we had been dreaming of. Over the next six months, I wanted to be sure that, if Susan and I were going to do this together, we had a good solid foundation of working together. So, I asked that we spend a session every week just talking to each other about how we were doing in our respective lives and what was coming up for each of us, and then have discussions around our approach to certain concepts and perspectives on ideas, followed by exploring how we felt about all of it. Whenever we wanted to jump into designing the modules, I’d pull us back and take the time to just learn more about each other and how we worked individually, and how that translated to working together. We’d notice certain personality traits in each other that spoke the story of our conditioning or certain reactions to each other and we’d openly discuss it, right in the moment it happened.

When it came to the designing part, we knew each other so well that we had an absolute ball and it was so very easy and effortless to work through this phase. We already knew we had a load of content to choose from and were able to quickly work through which parts were important and would fit best together. Our values were aligned, we knew each other's trigger points and insecurities, we knew each other's life stories, and we knew how to support each other through it all. And to this day and forever forward, I think that is the most important thing we did. For all the challenging and uncomfortable conversations we have had to have to get to where we are now, there is a very strong relationship that helps us to progress through these hot points much easier, much quicker and with respect, compassion and an element of safety that will never leave.

It's taken me a lifetime to figure out what keeps me feeling my absolute best, and it is a lifelong and daily practice to stay there. The gift I want to give is not only a safe and supportive environment for survivors to connect, explore and learn what feels good for them—knowing they are not alone in their experiences—but a place where they can imagine who they dream to be, and support them to become that. To provide a platform where women can empower themselves and each other constantly and continuously for as long as they need it.

This platform is everything that I am and everything I want to be, for myself and for every other survivor of sexual abuse. It's what I wished I'd had when I did therapy while still experiencing an uncertainty of who I was and how I fit in the world. It's the sisterhood I always thought I didn't deserve, the mother who never had the capacity to support me emotionally, and the community that gives me a sense of belonging and purpose.

## **REFERENCES**

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