

Interview on Interpersonal Violence/Assault with Suzanne, a survivor

Good Afternoon, my name is Alyssa Warden and I would like to welcome you back to Rising from the Ashes, Trauma Talks, a podcast series brought to by the UB School of Social Work Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. This series provides an opportunity for individuals to share their witness of how strength and resiliency have allowed them to rise from the ashes. Trauma talks follows people who have both worked within the field of trauma, as well as those who have experienced trauma. Here we will reflect on how trauma informed care can assist those who have experienced traumatic events to embrace a new life of wholeness, hope, strength, courage, safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Today I am here with Suzanne Perry. Suzanne is a survivor of domestic violence. On behalf of the institute we would like to thank you for being here today and sharing your story with us. Today I am going to let Suzanne start by telling her story that has allowed her to rise above the event and become a stronger, more confident person.

1:08 **Suzanne:** Alrighty, thank you for having me on! So I started dating the person who would be my abuser when I was seventeen. It didn't turn violent until about a year later, but the stage was starting to be set. I started being isolated from my friends, family, and all the things that I cared about were no longer a value or any good. I left the first time when I was 21, and stayed gone for 6 months. I left a total of three times and came back three times and then married him. And we have three children together. I stayed for a total of 22 years.

1:59 **Alyssa:** From your experience, what did you do to feel safe enough to take a step in leaving that relationship.

2:07 **Suzanne:** I was in fear for my life, and it was scary. Scared to leave, scared to stay. Having children made me stay, but I had fear that if I left and got caught — up until the last time that I left, I really didn't feel a safety net at all, it was extremely dramatic. And when I did leave, he stalked me and found me every time. He would manipulate my emotions so that he would lead me to believe that he had changed. I had no outside support, which left me very vulnerable to play into the games of manipulation — wanting to avoid the stigma of being a young single parent. The final time that I left was when our daughter was sixteen and she said, "I can't take living like this anymore. It's either me or him," and she was right. And that was my breaking point. Everyone has to reach their breaking point, and that was it for me. I knew when she said that that it was going down. So we made a pact that morning, and I said, "The next time that that happens, AND I give you the signal that you can call 911," and the reason we added that safety net is because I did once call the police on break at work and told them my situation and asked them what could be done. They said that in New York State that you can have a black eye and we can't do anything, but if he hits you with a shoe, we can use the shoe as a weapon and then we can arrest him. So at that point my only spark of hope was doused. I never forgot that. And I knew I had to have enough evidence on my body so that an arrest could be made. The fear was that if the police had come and they did nothing, the fear was that I would get beaten worse. So throughout the rest of those 22 years, never once had I called the police. There were no records, ever, and any bumps or bruises were "accidents." So when that did happen, I had enough

evidence and I told her to call. They saw evidence on me, and they did arrest him and hold him over night. That is what finally forced me to not return. I promised my children that I would never go back and I never did. I did not receive any external counseling or mentoring or any help. At the time I was so distraught and numb that I couldn't comprehend what the advocacy people were trying to say. I spent 22 years of my life walking on eggshells, scared, and trying to twist everything to appease my husband. It was horrible.

5:26 **Alyssa:** Yeah, it sounds like it was an intense journey and huge decision for you to make in your life that would be completely life changing. It took a lot to make that decision. And like you mentioned when you reached out for safety, it wasn't really responded to in the way that it should have been. But you were still strong enough to go forward and make that decision.

5:53 **Suzanne:** I had also poked around online for help while I was at work — that was the only place he wasn't monitoring my every move. I ran into brick walls because email boxes and voicemail boxes were full when I tried to reach out. So the times I had tried to escape, it proved to hold nothing.

6:23 **Alyssa:** It looks like there was a lot of barriers in your journey, so it's so impressive that you were able to get to that point of help.

6:40 **Suzanne:** Getting out and staying out! Because I am sure I could have used some counseling appointments, but the whole thing of court and having to make court, which I never did thank God — the DA represented me in court, I shook like a leaf in the waiting room. I had a five year court protection as a result of that.

7:10 **Alyssa:** So it looks like the DA was able to step in for your safety and represent you in court.

7:16 **Suzanne:** Yeah, I don't think I could have done it. I probably would have fainted! I was just so terrified of it and him.

7:26 **Alyssa:** Yeah, that would be an extremely scary situation. My question for you is: How did you get to the point where you are now helping other people?

7:37 **Suzanne:** I'd love to share that! When I got out of that situation it was very difficult because my kids didn't know who I was. The lifestyle that we lived, I was pretty much a doormat. I was unable to fend for them if my husband was yelling at them, and they couldn't stand up for me, either. We were never allowed to have one on one conversations, causing a great detachment. My kids were not receiving their own support network from their mother, so there were barriers there. The first year I had to reintroduce myself and it was very hard — I had to unbury layers of hatred and insults, I had to find myself. It took about a year to understand what had happened, and I never used the term "domestic violence," so I had to start looking at it for what it was. I wasn't revealing to my family what was going on, just the "oh yeah he hit me," which was nothing close to the honest truth. A year later, I was at the kitchen table of our new house, and I lost my job. My boss told me I just "wasn't there anymore," and he KNEW what

was going on so that's horrible. Now today, I don't think that would legally fly. That made me start my own business. I was thinking one Saturday afternoon about how I was protecting his family because I was afraid to say something to them, and didn't want to hurt the family name. I said, "To heck with that!" because I was the one who needed protection and I decided to share my story. So I started to talk about it. Twenty-two years later I started to reconnect with my best friend from high school, now I didn't go to my graduation because my school was stupid and so was everything about me, on Myspace. I found out that her husband was abusive too, and she moved across the country and was sad and wanted to get out. I flew to Arizona, helped her to back and move back home, and she has now married her high school sweetheart and she ended up living happily-ever after, five miles away from me. Before all of these she came home one week for her father's funeral, and we met up and went to a spa — now you don't get to do anything for yourself when you're in my case, but we got to talking about what had been happening in my house. And the girl who was doing my toenails eyes started to welt up and she told me that she grew up with an abusive father too. I wasn't even thinking about her, I was just rambling on. So after about 40 minutes or so there was about a dozen people that came into the room and we all started talking about how domestic violence has impacted our lives. So these girls said they didn't want to personally tell anyone their stories and they needed me to be their voice. That was the pivotal moment, I was like "Yeah!" So these stories and hundreds of stories around the world that people have trusted me with their experiences, is fueling me so every time I speak, or share, or help someone — it's on behalf of them, all of the people standing behind me, because someone else needs to hear it. So I created a non-profit company called OPMusic House back into 2010. I was still shy, and didn't want to go, "BAM domestic violence!" So I had to wrestle with how I can do this. So I went behind music. I got bands and then I started to share my story. It ended up working and helped me with my speaking skills. I put on a concert called The Exposure Concert - Because Love Shouldn't Hurt. We are going on our sixth year. I am now super comfortable talking about trauma and domestic violence and all of the things that spin off of it. Because somehow it's all intertwined with trauma and outcomes. We need to get in there to stop past trauma from creating future trauma. And now I have also rebranded, now that I am more comfortable it's called loveshouldnthurt.tv, BAM it's out there!

13:36 **Alyssa:** I love that, that's absolutely fantastic. You're story really speaks to empowerment. And how something you didn't even want to call domestic violence at one point and now all these women around you are talking about the same thing and their experiences, normalizing it. Creating that moment of "Oh, I can do something about that!" Incredible. And so as far as choice goes, how has your ability to make positive choices helped your ability to see more of a future for yourself and other people who have made the choice to tell their story?

14:18 **Suzanne:** That's an awesome question because my mottos here is called the Pine Piper of Positive. And people are very surprised when they meet me that I am not a bitter person. I don't use a nasty past as a thorn because I wouldn't end up any good. I consider it "pressurized poop coming out as a pearl." All of those bruises and cuts, knowing what it felt like, gives you scar tissue which is stronger than regular skin. And so it kind of helps me to empower someone else who may be getting picked on. It develops an almost immediate trust when I say things that they didn't even tell me like, "I bet you can't even make a certain expression without getting yelled at," and they are like "how did you know!!" Even over the phone or through Facebook, but taking positive and learning it to drive your mission. That's what empowers me. Now that I've

been doing it for six years, I like the feedback. People used to say, “You don’t even know what you’re doing,” not in an insult way but just letting me know. And it used to bother me because I couldn’t define it. But six years later, getting all of the feedback I’ve grown stronger, and allowed people to share their story and am able to hear back on how I’ve empowered others. It’s awesome to be me today because I’m in-fact saving people’s lives! I wish I had that for me. But by the same token, hadn’t I endured what I endured, I couldn’t be the awesome person I am today doing these things.

16:29 **Alyssa:** Absolutely. And from your experiences, you’ve found a lot of people have also experienced it. It does allow them to trust you because they see you can understand what they’ve gone through. And your collaboration with music and getting the message out there, it’s definitely made a more positive step towards the future for health and for everyone else. We’ve also said how this experience has become so empowering, and how others have become empowering. It’s an incredible example of how you can take such a negative and horrible experience and turn it into something that helps everyone else. And from what you’ve said it looks like your world view of helping everyone else around you and making sure that you can be that difference that is there for them that you wish is there for you.

17:29 **Suzanne:** I’ve gotten some thank you letters, and I hang them up. Back when I was new, I wasn’t aware of what I look like to anyone. You lose yourself. You don’t wear nice clothes, you just lose yourself. Going through photos in my closet one day, it was a shocker to see that I was hiding these in the closet for a reason. I look terrible! And I’d be weary and tired and I thought I was getting away with it, but I looked bad. Getting rid of the big baggy clothes. It’s important to realize that you never deserved it, you never asked for it. And in no stretch is it ever okay. Love shouldn’t hurt.

18:35 **Alyssa:** What advice do you have for providers or social workers who come in contact with someone who has experienced domestic violence who hasn’t gotten in the process, or just started the process, of making that change?

18:47 **Suzanne:** I feel someone who has walked the walk is who I want to listen to. I don’t feel like you can effectively really connect with someone through a textbook. But I’ve shared that with professionals and it’s hurtful. I don’t ever want to be hurtful because the people who choose to go into that field go into it for darn-good reasons. So I think there needs to be a mesh in there to get in that comfort level from a victims stand-point. There just needs to be a middle there somewhere.

19:35 **Alyssa:** So instead of having a professional pretending to know something and experience something up here, we have to meet someone here who is the expert in their own minds — And connect them with people who have experienced the same thing?

19:49 **Suzanne:** Yeah! I consider myself an advocate, but people want to hear it. From, “oh what did you go through?” Even in recovery groups that’s what they talk about — AA or any of those. I’m here because of this. Well how can I confine in you if you don’t know what it feels like? And then you automatically may feel like they are judging you, even though the probably aren’t, but you are fresh out of it and are afraid of continuously being judged. You’re lost and you need to

find yourself. And that's hard and you need to learn you're okay and worthy of love. Most importantly you need to learn to love yourself. That's a place that people are broken. I counsel, shouldn't use that word in New York State, I mentor people today and it's a disconnect. They don't understand what it means to love yourself. And so that's been the greatest hole when I'm trying to get people from an escape plan to executing it to building an awesome plan and loving life. And that's what I do, that's the hole that I see. They don't understand what it means to accept and love yourself. So whenever people need that, I know how because I've done it. So if you feel that you're ugly, worthless, or stupid, whatever they've been telling you has been pounded into your head is not true! You've got to learn that outsider's opinions don't matter. All those things, outside noise, cut it all out. You don't have to stay in toxic relationships. You may have to cut off family relationships because, and a lot of times it's parental. My ex-husband told our daughter "you're fat, you're a slug, I'm going to make sure you never get your driver's license." Why would you do that? This is your daughter. And my older son is now a state record holder for all natural body building, and his father told him at age fifteen when he started working out, he said, "you're never going to get any bigger!" So now my son sometimes will use those words, "yeah I'm never going to get any bigger," and he's HUGE, and all natural. My three children and I have all come up very positive and I'm very, very fortunate because it often doesn't end up that way. There's anxiety or depression or... I've learned so much. My own children, I didn't think to interview them, but outsiders tell me stories and it finally hit me like "AHHH! That's my kids, oh my gosh!" Because I've learned children who grow up watching their children fight or whatever, they grow up with anxiety. Like they should be doing something to help the abused parent, but they can't because they would be threatened. So if that doesn't get resolved as they grow up it could harbor and possible result in addictions or being an abuser.

23:33 **Alyssa:** So it sounds like everyone you've touched in your life is just so resilient. And I think that's mostly from being in contact with you and seeing how resilient you've been and just turning it into a positive thing. Going after things you're so passionate about. And so before we end, my last question would be: What do you have to say to people who may be listening who could be in an abusive relationship right now?

23: 55 **Suzanne:** That let me be living testimony that you never have to live under someone else's foot. You are important. You matter. And everybody is somebody! I love that. It doesn't have to stay that way. YOU can reach out to me. I'll help you. I'll Facebook you, or chat, or whatever it is. Smoke signals, anything. No matter what it is, your life can always be better. And even if you think you have a good life now you can always improve. And if it doesn't feel right, then don't roll with it. Listen to your gut and know that you are worthy of love.

24:37 **Alyssa:** Thank you so much for coming in and having this interview today with me Suzanne. And, thanks for all our listeners at Rising from the Ashes, Trauma Talks!