

Interview on Childhood Sexual Abuse with Natasha, a survivor

DISCLAIMER: Due to audio volume quality in some parts of this interview, [muffled] has been inserted in places that are inaudible.

Hello, my name is Josie 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 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 Natasha. Natasha is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. On behalf of the institute, we would like to really thank Natasha for being here today and for sharing your story with us. So now I am going to let Natasha begin with giving you, the audience, a little bit of her story.

1:01 **Natasha:** My dad was very abusive, physically. The only time he was sexually abusive was on my birthday, and that is when he would basically rape me once a year. I started having issues in school, and had to go to summer school in sixth grade. My parents went on vacation and they left me with my uncle, who, pretty much I was like his sex slave the entire week. He raped me like endlessly throughout that entire week. And then after that it just continued until I got pregnant by him when I was fifteen. And I had the abortion when I was sixteen.

1:42 **Josie:** And in the week of experiencing all of that when you were young, at a point later on in your life did you seek out, or be able to connect with any type of services.

1:55 **Natasha:** I pretty much, my parents trained me to just. I learned to basically disassociate. So once I moved out I didn't really deal with anything. I had flash backs going on, I just.. I didn't know what it was. And finally a few years ago I had a major mental breakdown where I wanted to... I was just going to take a bunch of pills. I didn't necessarily want to actually kill myself. I just wanted everything to stop. I wanted all the disgusting feelings and things to just go away. So I just wanted to go to sleep for a long time. I ended up calling my fiancé, just terrified him made him come home, and that's when I started to get in the process of getting help. I was too scared to talk. It was engraved in me to never speak about it. And I started off at the out patient for Buffalo Psychiatric Center and got linked with Crisis Services.

2:53 **Josie:** Thank you so much for being willing to share that story with us. As you're talking about what happened to you when you were so young, and then also in the wake of that, coming to, get connected with Buffalo Psych Center and Crisis Services, something that it brings to mind is what we call the Five Values of Trauma Informed Care. And Trauma Informed Care, it basically asks us as individuals and service providers to not as, "what is wrong with this person," but to ask, "what's happened to this person?" And so those five guiding values are: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. And they're really tools you know, for service providers and for community members, family and friends, to really be informed about what has happened to a person. And so we want to just spend a little bit of time talking to you about those

five values. First of all, starting with safety, safety can mean both physical safety, but also can mean emotional safety. Did that play a role for you, especially when you decided to get linked up to some services, you know Buffalo Psych Center? Was there a role that safety played in allowing you to do that? Either with the safety that you found with your fiancé? Or the safety that you found there in seeking those services?

4:22 **Natasha:** Yeah, it was the safety of my fiancé and his family, and they kind of all just banded together and supported my getting help, and saying there were things out there. They sat with me and helped me look for places. I called like twenty different places, and I could kind of just tell over the phone sometimes how I felt by just in the way they would talk. You could say it was a safety with them. It took me about three weeks to actually talk to the social worker and the psychiatrist. And to actually open up and say anything. I use to just sit there for an hour and cry and I just couldn't trust them, to talk.

5:06 **Josie:** And what you just said in terms of how it was hard to really build that trust with them, trust is the next value which entirely aligns with safety as you just pinpointed. Was there anything about that environment with the psychologist that you saw that allowed you to experience enough trust to start opening up and start talking? What was that experience like?

5:34 **Natasha:** The one thing, they asked what I wanted out of this and we got onto the topics of medications and things like that nature. Cause at that point I had gone through a psych-evaluation just to see what I had and what should my diagnosis' be, [muffled] and anxiety disorders and the one thing that stood out was that they were with me and that I didn't want to be a walking zombie on medication and I wanted to actually be able to face everything and cope, like learn coping skills rather than just masking it with medicine, so. They were in agreeance with that and even put me on the lowest dosage as possible. And worked in the talking aspect. And when I found crisis services, I started having some issues with BSC, they put together a support group and ended up somehow sending the letter to my parents' house, because I got a phone call saying, "Well are you going to join or not join or...?" And I was like, "I have no idea what you're talking about." And she was like "Oh I sent it to this address, I was sure if you were still at the other one," So, that just—I tried to go back a few times, but I just couldn't. And that's how I got linked with Crisis Services. I got to say I trusted them going right in there. I mean the place is completely guarded. You have to buzz the door to get in and the way that they first talked to me was not in a "what's wrong with you manor," or "you're going to do this," it's we. Anything they said to me any issues I've had it's "okay how are WE going to deal with this?" I didn't feel like I was just like a number with them. So it made me feel safe and comfortable in talking.

7:37 **Josie:** That's really power, the role that, I mean just getting buzzed in. That's very true that that can make such a huge difference in terms of having that sense of safety.

7:47 **Natasha:** And you have to say who you are, they don't let you in until they check that you actually have an appointment. After my sessions with them are done, they are like, "are you okay? Do you need a few minutes? You can stay as long as you want. You can — we'll leave or we'll stay with you," it's just... they're awesome.

8:07 **Josie:** Now that really ties in very directly to the next point which is choice. So you just pinpointed a way, it sounds like, Crisis Services provides choice just in terms of those little choices of being able to stay a little bit longer in terms of having the option of them being with you for a length of time or not. Were there other experiences with Crisis Services where you were able to have some choice in the other services you had access to or take advantage of?

8:42 **Natasha:** They have the 24 hour hotline that you can call. I can call my advocates there if I want to. They also have a, I don't know exactly what they call it but, an investigative team cause there are some statute limitations in NY, so they have a whole separate team with detectives and stuff and legal console. Which is pretty—

9:08 **Josie:** It's like a one-stop shop where you really do have a choice of every service you might wanna take advantage of, is there if you want to. The next value is collaboration. You've already touched on this, you said that everybody at Crisis Services always uses the term "we" and it's very much a collaborative effort. Have you also had experiences in terms of collaborating with loved ones, significant others, and that thing in your life? Have you been able to essentially collaborate with the close people in your life, to in kind of working through your services and really accessing what there is available at Crisis Services, and what not?

9:55 **Natasha:** Well they allow like family and stuff to get worked in. They've helped me print out papers to help educate them. So they can kind of understand the PTS side of things. You know cause I can explain it all day to them and, and they try to understand, and I respect that, but they just... education is key sometimes.

10:21 **Josie:** And it's really nice to hear that they also provide the opening if you want it of family being included. Because that can be helpful if you deem it so. So the last value of trauma informed care is empowerment, and empowerment is more than just cheerleading. It's really a strength space focus. So I am just wondering what has your experience been with empowerment? Whether that's at Crisis Services, whether that's among loved ones? What's been your experience of that throughout this journey?

10:57 **Natasha:** Getting treatment. I read something a long time ago that was basically "the best revenge is to be happy and do good and just be successful and happy." That was something that always stuck with me. Getting help for myself, getting help from [muffled], just not letting them win because they took my entire 17 years away from me. So I am slowly starting to get my life back. And even just helping other people that really helps me more than anything. Through Crisis Services they also have private support groups and I started talking at those and just getting in touch with other people who need help or are scared to talk. It's just... I'm just living. Starting to feel things again. I have my moments where I feel safe or happy. It's just I'm getting there any hopefully it will stay.

12:09 **Josie:** I really like that, in terms of, it's kind of that ultimate act of revolt or success is really just happiness. So that's really awesome. So for those who are listening who may be are either facing similar experiences to yourself or even providers who are in an organization who provide services for survivors of childhood abuse, do you have any final words on your own experience, why you feel these values are important? Anything at all you want to share?

12:48 **Natasha:** All the values are important it's just essential for people to get help. It's needed. Just not to give up and it does get better. And you really learn about people who care about you, and that it's okay. I don't know, I'm all over the place with this one.

13:05 **Josie:** No I think you've really captured a lot of powerful things for people to hear in terms of just, you can do it.

13:14 **Natasha:** And even just for social workers to just make someone feel safe, and not keep looking at your clock. That doesn't help. That's what the other place used to do all the time and it just makes it impossible.

13:29 **Josie:** That's a really important thing I think for providers to hear, especially when dealing with in an environment with folks that have really experienced a lot of trauma in early life, that it's really powerful what your body language says. Well thank you so much Natasha. On behalf of the Institute of Trauma and Trauma Informed Care, I would really like to thank you for taking the time to speak with us today and being vulnerable and open and sharing yourself with our audience. It's really been my pleasure to talk to you.

(PAUSE and then a new broadcast from Josie)

In this next short piece, Natasha wanted to provide some additional input on getting help, and the important role that adults can play in intervening, especially in the case of childhood abuse and neglect. So thank you Natasha for sharing more. And now I will return it back over to Natasha.

14:28 **Natasha:** In terms of the getting help part, I had actually tried to tell one of my teachers who then went straight to my parents because my parents are really loved people in the community, so that just made it a lot worse and also there is another teacher who had noticed a finger mark on my wrist and actually reported it. I got called to the guidance counselor's office, and they ended up getting CPS involved. And CPS opened an investigation against my parents and my mom had pulled me aside when she found out and told me I basically had to lie my way through it all otherwise it would get a lot worse. I also have a brother and a sister. And she said it would be all on me because we would possibly go to different homes. They would be abused or things of that nature. So my, that, I felt guilty. I didn't want them to have to endure the things that I was. So that scared me enough to — they came up with a typical story of she was just mad at us, we tried to punish her. I had the bad grades to back up that I was a bad kid. Just — you know lying and saying things I shouldn't. So then they closed the case. And that was another thing with the teachers, they were always just told we work with her, we try to help her she is bad — you know, I did try a few times. So you know, that just comes into play with teachers knowing more about these things and signs to look for in terms of helping.