

Where You Are

S5 Episode 6 — Helping Kids Grow Through What They Go Through
With Dr. Chris Willard

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Chris Willard: The best predictor that a kid who's been through adverse childhood experiences doesn't just survive, but actually thrives out the other side is one caring, consistent, compassionate adult in their life.

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Char Black: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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Bryn Askwith: And I'm Bryn Askwith. In a previous Where You Are episode, we explored the topic of trauma, what it is, and how parents and caregivers can support a child at home who's experienced trauma. Today on Where You Are, we dive deeper into the topic of supporting your child through trauma. Joined by Dr. Chris Willard, Harvard psychologist and author of How to Grow Through What We Go Through, Char and I discuss the concept of post-traumatic growth, techniques to encourage post-traumatic growth in bodies, minds, and hearts of kids who've experienced trauma, and practical ways for parents and caregivers to support their child to grow through what they go through. Let's get into that conversation.

Back on the podcast today is Dr. Chris Willard. Dr. Willard has extensive experience working with individuals and families, and specializes in the treatment of anxiety, depression, and stress related disorders.

Great to have you back on the podcast with us, Dr. Willard.

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Chris Willard: Thanks so much. It's great to be back.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. Willard, we know that many children and youth will experience trauma in their lifetime, and so at the Kelty Centre we often get parents and caregivers connecting, looking for evidence-based ways to help their child who has experienced trauma. So when we came across your recent book, How to Grow Through What We Go Through, we were intrigued to say the least.

I'm wondering if you could start by telling us briefly about your book and perhaps two to three concepts from it that are relevant for families who are supporting a child that's experienced trauma.

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Chris Willard: Absolutely. The book, it started in the pandemic. There was so much going on I think in 2020. Globally, we had a greater awareness of racial injustice. We had a major fire season in terms of climate change. And then of course the living with the pandemic.

And so, one thing that happened when the pandemic began was I went from traveling and going places, and talking about mindfulness and how great it was, is suddenly not traveling anywhere. And so I started working on a talk and that actually ended up turning into the book. But the first thing that I noticed was that while many people experience trauma in their lives, actually only a small number go on to develop post-traumatic stress. And actually more people go on to develop what's called post-traumatic growth, which is the beautiful thing that it sounds like it is, which is come through difficult, challenging situations, stronger than before.

What I wanted to do here is try to introduce what are the conditions under which we're most likely to not just survive difficulties and challenges in our lives but actually thrive and come through them again, stronger, wiser, more connected, more balanced in many ways. And that happens on different timelines for everybody.

And so that was like a half an hour talk, and it became a two hour talk, and then when it hit three and a half hours, I was like, all right, I got to write this down and that'll be my book. So the way I organized it was in terms of a biopsychosocial model. And so first really learning how to regulate and care for our bodies in powerful ways. Our bodies are really the foundation for our healthy mind and healthy relationships. And then the next section really started to dive into mindfulness and self-compassion in terms of helping us to see more clearly, ourselves and the world around us. And then the third section turning toward the social in terms of how we can in some ways heal our relationship with ourselves, and also learn how to heal and trust others to heal us, because we heal in relation to others.

So the book was really sort of an exploration of mindfulness of our bodies, mindfulness of our minds, and mindfulness and compassion in our relationships. That's the very long short version of the book and how it came to be.

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Char Black: I'm just curious, one of our questions was around the difference between post-traumatic growth and resilience. Can you speak a bit about that?

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Chris Willard: Yeah. Two of the distinguishing features of trauma are that it's an event that someone feels helpless, and out of control, and unpredictable. That's three, I guess. But I think resilience in some ways prepares us to manage trauma better and to bounce back faster. And I

think it actually comes through lived experience and it comes also through embodied practices of mindfulness, and compassion, and self-compassion, and equanimity, and other practices like that.

To me, post-traumatic growth is when we have been through a traumatic experience, can we come through them with more wisdom, with more compassion, with more perspective, and in some ways with more balance, and a strong, fierce, compassionate desire to help others who've maybe also experienced suffering and trauma in their lives. So resilience can hopefully happen before and post-traumatic growth afterwards.

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Char Black: Thanks for clarifying that, Chris. And when you're working with families, what do you share with them about post-traumatic growth?

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Chris Willard: I think when I'm talking with families, part of my job is to be an educator and a cheerleader of what I see in them as being possible. And I think just saying, "Oh, you'll feel better. You'll feel stronger," that can be a little bit patronizing. Some of those self-affirmations actually make things worse because if you say, "I'm beautiful," and you don't feel beautiful, or you say, "I'm strong," you don't feel strong, you feel worse.

So I see your potential to be strong. I see your potential at the other side to be someone that can actually have a tremendous amount to offer others in your journey of healing. Those kinds of messages I think can be so well received when they're offered freely and authentically to others. And so that's really what I try to mirror back to people, to be that reminder that they have more strength than they're aware that they have, I think is what I see my job as being.

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Char Black: You are listening to Where You Are. I'm Char Black. Looking for more information and resources on trauma, and child and youth mental health? Visit our website at keltymentalhealth.ca/trauma-and-ptsd.

I was just reflecting on what you said earlier around having certain preconditions for post-traumatic growth versus PTSD, some suffer PTSD, and then others have post-traumatic growth. What are those preconditions that you were referring to? Could you clarify that?

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Chris Willard: I think some folks know about ACEs, adverse childhood experiences that can add up over someone's life are associated with bad outcomes. There are also protective factors in someone's life, even if they've experienced those adverse childhood events. The best predictor that a kid who's been through adverse childhood experiences doesn't just survive but actually thrives out the other side, is one caring, consistent, compassionate adult in their life. So when I think about myself as a parent, hopefully I'm that to my kids as a parent, practice building

my muscles of empathy for others so that I can be as compassionately present as possible, and be less likely to get burned out, is so important in this work.

Another one is a sense of community. And so that can be a sense of cultural identity. It can be a spiritual community, and not just affinity groups for kids, but also a sports team, a drama club, whatever it might be, where there is a larger sense of community.

A sense of purpose being another one. I think helping others is a beautiful meaning and purpose. We actually know that's associated in the positive psych research with happiness, with thriving. And I think we forget that kids can help others too. It's like decorating the school, painting murals, those community service projects. If you're part of a choir in your school, singing at the old folks home at the hospital, at the homeless shelter, tutoring younger kids, creating beautiful artwork that can be hung in the coffee shop or something like that. There's many ways you can be helpful to others. So many of these kinds of things are some of those protective factors.

And then kind of back to the book, I would say protective factors, starting with our bodies. Can we mindfully care for our bodies in terms of what we consume? Can we find mindfulness practices and self-compassion practices that really are helpful to us? And then lastly, what are ways that we can help them feel more empowered in their lives? The opposite of feeling helpless is feeling helpful, so help them to feel helpful. They can feel a bit more sense of control and predictability in their lives. Just simply helping kids make a schedule for themselves, or let them know what's coming next is really important for kids who've experienced the trauma. So these are kind of smallish sounding things that are actually very, very empowering.

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Bryn Askwith: Are there other practical ways that parents and caregivers can support their children to help them grow through what they go through?

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Chris Willard: Yeah, I think the mistake we sometimes make as mental health professionals, it's often a mistake that I make as a parent, whether it's a big trauma my kids have been through or a little oopsy, conflict on the playground, who knows what, is like, "Let's talk this thing to death." The kids aren't always ready. And I think when anything grows, things need space to grow. A plant will suffocate if we don't give it space to grow.

So that kind of touch and go of, we don't want to ignore anything, but if we check in too much that can feel overbearing, or kind of force kids to talk. But just saying, "Hey, I know you got a lot going on, whether you want to talk about it or not, I'm here. And I heard this thing happened at school or in the community today. I can give you advice, or if you don't want anything, that's fine too." I think giving ourselves permission to give kids permission to process on their own feels really important to me.

And that's not ignoring the issue. It's just saying, "We don't have to do this or kind of push through this." This is a mistake. I think that is a well intended one that I find as a therapist,

parents are like, "Well, my kid's having a hard time. Let's double up on therapy." And it's like, well, maybe you should double up on time with their friends after school rather than hanging out with me after school. I think we tend to forget that, or it's a blind spot I think I have or people in my field have. And so that to me feels particularly important. As long as we're naming it, I think that's the key.

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Char Black: So we will be adding the link to your book on our show notes as part of this minisode.

Are there any other resources for parents that you'd want to highlight related to post-traumatic growth?

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Chris Willard: I think just remembering that these things take time. So be a resource to yourself and be a resource to your partner, or co-parent, or other caregivers. The circles of care, that we're caring for that person, but then if we're the caregiver, we also need care. Because again, more than anything, what does a kid who's been through a tough time need? They need a caring and compassionate adult. I say this to people about trauma and trauma-informed schools all the time too. It's like, "What's the trauma tool for this?" "Well, the trauma tool is you, so take good care of yourself. You really are the healing mechanism."

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Bryn Askwith: I know on each episode, like we mentioned last time, we often ask for words of wisdom, although I'll be honest, I think you just provided some amazing gems there. But if there's anything else you would want to share with our listeners today.

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Chris Willard: I think no rush on this stuff is important. And remembering too, that trauma can also be hiding other things, right? It might be trauma, but also there might be ADHD there. It might be trauma, but there might also be depression or addiction there. It's not just one thing or the other. So we don't want to over-diagnose at the cost of missing some other very real struggles that a child might be having.

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Bryn Askwith: Thank you so much. We really appreciate you making the time to be here today with us. Dr. Willard.

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Chris Willard: Thank you.

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Char Black: Thanks so much for listening today. Bryn and I are always so happy to have you tune in.

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Bryn Askwith: If you enjoyed our conversation, please leave us a rating where you might be listening now.

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