

LIVING FEARLESSLY DESPITE THE DEMONS

Developed by Diana Raab, PhD

In recent weeks, people around the world have been shocked by the suicide of two iconic individuals—Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade. A few years ago, we were all in shock about the loss of Robin Williams; however, the list is much larger than these three individuals. Suicide occurs as a result of mental anguish and crosses all economic, demographic, and social boundaries—it does not discriminate. The precursor for suicide is often depression, and because it's treatable, it's so important that it's identified and dealt with early on.

No doubt, those who decide to take their lives have probably been suffering for an extended period of time. Often the emotional pain is so overwhelming that they view suicide as their only viable alternative. According to the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States. Also, the suicide rate among middle-aged women (45 to 65) rose 63 percent from 1999 to 2014. Some of the reasons have to do with women's changing roles in the workplace and the challenge of juggling career and family—it's a lot to manage. Women feel as if they're being pulled in too many directions, and perfectionism is something that is difficult to maintain but also hard to let go of. While many women feel as if they should be able to do it all, there are times when it's just not possible; and they may take out their frustrations by overindulging in drugs, food, and/or alcohol.

My first memoir, *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal*, was inspired by my grandmother's suicide in 1964 when I was ten years old. Forty years after she died, my parents found her retrospective journal in the closet of my childhood home, which depicted her life as an orphan in World War I. After researching her life, it was clear that the experience of losing her parents when she was eleven years old tormented her for the rest of her life. She and many like her were unable to shake the demons from the past.

While losing my grandmother and caretaker was very difficult for me at such a vulnerable time in my own growth, it was only during my adulthood when I realized the effect that incident had on my entire life. Those who take their lives suffer a great deal, but those who are left behind suffer even more, as we are often left with many unanswered questions.

If there are people in our lives who are depressed, it's important that we encourage them to seek help. We are living in trying times, and sometimes the negativity surrounding us can become overwhelming. Not only does being continually bombarded by it every day make it more difficult to think positively, but it can lead to feeling fearful, hopeless, and depressed. Fear can block us from moving forward in a productive way.

Fear is primarily a trauma response, and sometimes it just means making the decision to be courageous and less afraid. If fear overtakes us, it can be immobilizing. Peter Levine, in his book *Walking the Tiger* (1997), says that in nature, this immobility is called the "freezing response" and simply serves as a survival strategy. He claims that studies have shown that the only way to go into and come out of trauma is to have this response. "It is a gift to us from the wild," he says (p. 17).

Those who have undergone trauma and suffer from PTSD sometimes don't even realize the gravity of their experience—

whether it is due to abuse, violence, war, or natural disasters—and there can be long-lasting effects. Levine says that when people go to doctors with symptoms and there is no apparent cause, it's possible that trauma lies somewhere in their histories, and it might only emerge during another stressful period in their lives.

This was particularly obvious to me in January when my Southern California town was hit by deadly fires and mudslides. Just about all of us in the community were affected, but it was apparent that those who'd had earlier traumas had an even more challenging time. For example, some people had a resurgence of illnesses such as asthma and stomach ulcers, which they hadn't experienced in a long time.

The consequences of hidden previous traumas can manifest in fear-based physical and psychological behaviors, which can have a significant impact on a person's life. Even during our everyday journeys, courage is very important, but it's particularly crucial during challenging times.

According to author and humanistic psychologist Rollo May (1975), courage is not the opposite of despair but comes from the French word *coeur*, meaning "heart," as the heart pumps in order to make all emotional and psychological virtues possible. Following trauma, it takes focus and effort to stabilize ourselves so that we can live freely. The journey back to fearlessness and courage might be a challenging one, filled with transformation, but it's well worth the wait.

Here are some tips on how to become less fearful and more courageous:

- ◆ Understand and acknowledge your fears.
- ◆ Recognize where you hold fear in your body.
- ◆ Consider formulating positive affirmations, and repeat them often.
- ◆ Find someone to talk to about your feelings.
- ◆ Begin a journaling practice.
- ◆ Look for the positive attitudes and attributes in others.
- ◆ Engage in mindfulness and meditation.
- ◆ Practice gratitude.

References

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