

# WRESTLING GHOSTS

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EXPLORING  
CHILDHOOD TRAUMA  
& HEALING GUIDE

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FILMAKER CONTACT

Ana Joanes:  
anasofiajoanes@gmail.com / 917 584 5552

# WRESTLING GHOSTS

## EXPLORING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND HEALING

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### **PART 1:** **AN OVERVIEW OF THE SCIENCE OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA**

#### **YOU ARE NOT ALONE!**

BEFORE WE GET STARTED, TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR LIFE. TAKE A LOOK AT THE STATEMENTS BELOW, AND TAKE NOTE OF THE ONES THAT ARE TRUE FOR YOU.

- I'm not enjoying the time I spend with my friends and family. I often choose to stay home alone rather than be with people.
- I'm not feeling motivated to get out of bed in the morning. I dread my parenting and/or work obligations.
- I feel like I don't deserve to be happier, to have a better life.
- I need a couple of glasses of wine or hemp to unwind at night.
- I am concerned with my emotional eating, bingeing, and/or anxiety about food.
- I am in an unfulfilling relationship / job but not making any step to make changes.
- I feel ugly and/or not loveable.
- I'm tired of the yelling and fighting with my partner and/or my children.
- I'm constantly exhausted and/or overwhelmed.
- I've been dealing with/suffering from chronic health issues (migraines, back pain, IBS, and/or autoimmune diseases such as lupus, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, Crohn's, and so on).
- I'm worried for my kid who is struggling with anxiety, learning disabilities, and so on.

**YOUR HEALTH, WELLBEING, AND RELATIONSHIPS ARE ALL CONNECTED.  
NOT ONLY ARE THEY CONNECTED, THEY ARE ALL ROOTED IN YOU PAST.  
LET US EXPLAIN WHY.**

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### TOXIC STRESS

At the beginning of Wrestling Ghosts, Kim admits she never plays with her kids and doesn't enjoy their company. Most of us see our shortcomings or difficulties as the result of laziness, a lack of discipline, or even poor character. Whether it's drinking too much, yelling at our kids, staying in a job we hate, or neglecting to take care of ourselves--most of us blame ourselves. Kim does too. She blames herself and feels hopeless about changing things.

We're here to shatter the belief that we are to blame. Why? Because research has found that the behavior we chalk up to incompetence is actually the unequivocal result of what happened in our childhood. We know that Toxic Stress experienced during childhood actually physically alters a person's brain and body. Toxic stress affects the expression of genes, hormonal balance, and brain development. We end up with poor physical and mental health, which results in many of the adverse circumstances in our present lives. This makes us unhappy with ourselves and the people around us, including our families.

It's hard to believe, but [concrete proof](#)<sup>1</sup> from the MRI scans of the brains of people who have experienced toxic stress during childhood show that an altered flow of stress hormones do in fact change the brain: The hippocampus (a small section of the brain) is up to 7% smaller and atrophied. This is significant because the hippocampus is associated with the functions of feeling and reaction. Together with the hypothalamus and the amygdala, the hippocampus helps control different bodily functions, such as the endocrine system, as well as our "fight or flight," or stress response. The damage to our brains leaves us both over and under reacting to outside stimulus. The result of your childhood experiences causes a kind of a neurological straightjacket that all the willpower and self-flagellation in the world simply can't undo.

These changes to the brain are NOT irrevocable. We will show you how to repair them! But before we can move to healing, we have to understand why the damage happened.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3307045/>

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### THE BEAR IN YOUR LIVING ROOM

To understand why toxic stress causes so much harm while children are developing, we have to understand the body's natural response to stress.

Imagine you're face-to-face with a grizzly bear. How would your body react? Your heart would begin to race and your breathing would become rapid. You're in what's known as flight or fight, or [stress response](#).<sup>2</sup> Your body seizes up. A flood of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released into your bloodstream, triggering glucose and fats to run for cover and store up in your body for just in case.

But then the bear shrugs and walks away. The threat is gone. You enter the second half of the fear cycle: recovery and relaxation. Your body returns to its normal state of homeostasis. You breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that you're safe.

Now, imagine that the bear lives with you in your home. The threat never really leaves and it's never okay to relax. What happens to those stress hormones and physical responses in our bodies? They never go away; instead, we live in a constant state of hyperalertness, bodies constantly flooded with stress hormones that are now toxic to us.

### WHAT IS TRAUMA?

We commonly refer to this toxic stress as childhood trauma. Trauma can invoke extreme, tragic images, and it can include any deeply disturbing or distressing experience. Though trauma can connote severe forms of abuse, including physical and sexual, and/or extreme neglect, it is not limited in this way. In fact, trauma includes parental behavior such as emotional neglect or unavailability.

Children rely on their parents and caregivers for safety and security. A secure attachment to a caregiver is what allows children to tolerate stress. And when children cannot depend on a caregiver, that in itself becomes a source of stress. The key here is that the stress response stops when the parents become available again.

Whether or not you consider your upbringing mildly problematic or severely abusive, the important thing is this: how trauma looks and how individuals respond to it is extremely complex. One thing for sure is, trauma need not be dramatic to have a lasting impact.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC33070>

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Think of it this way: The body's alarm system is like a sprinkler system that turns on when it detects a fire. When working normally, the sprinklers extinguish the fire. But if the sprinkler system turns on throughout the day to prepare for a fire that hasn't started yet, the alarm system begins to work against us. Mold grows and makes us sick. Eventually, our waterlogged walls would sag, our floors would collapse, and our foundation would begin to crumble. Stress hormones do the same in children's bodies, causing chronic inflammation, an over-stimulated immune system, and damaging key parts of the brain. It's never okay to relax. What happens to those stress hormones and physical responses in our bodies? They never go away; instead, we live in a constant state of hyperalertness, bodies constantly flooded with stress hormones that are now toxic to us.

## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EVENTS (ACES)

Medical and psychiatric professionals have long known that trauma and stress have dramatic effects on mental health. But in 1995, a team of researchers conducted a [two-year study](#) that focused specifically on the link between trauma in childhood and signs of disease and other factors that can contribute to an early, unexpected death.

The test was simple. Participants were asked ten "yes" or "no" questions identifying experiences in their childhood that were related to abuse, neglect, and adversity. These experiences of trauma are called Adverse Childhood Events, or ACEs for short. What the researchers found was completely unexpected and the results provided groundbreaking information.

Before we look at their findings, we want to give you the opportunity to take the test. Remember, each "yes" answer scores a point.

The results for us were revelatory and will likely be for you as well.

**"The health risks for Adverse Childhood Experiences are higher than smoking, alcohol, or exposure to chemical toxins and pollution."**

— [Donna Jackson Nakazawa](#) - author of 6 books including [Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal](#).

We highly recommend this [TED talk](#)<sup>4</sup> by Nadine Burke Harris, whose work in her pediatric clinic in San Francisco is at the forefront of ACEs awareness.

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3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/opinion/brooks-the-psych-approach.html>

4 [https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine\\_burke\\_harris\\_how\\_childhood\\_trauma\\_affects\\_health\\_across\\_a\\_lifetime](https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime)

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### YOUR ACES SCORE

#### PRIOR TO YOUR 18TH BIRTHDAY:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often: Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or, act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often: Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? Or ever hit you so hard that you had marks, or were injured?
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever: Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? Or attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
4. Did you often or very often feel that: No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or that your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
5. Did you often or very often feel that: You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? Or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
7. Was one of your parents or care-takers: Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? Or: sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Or ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or a knife?
8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used drugs?
9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?
10. Did a household member go to prison?

***Now add up your "Yes" answers. This is your ACES Score.***

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### ACES MAKE YOU SICK

#### IF YOU SCORED HIGHER THAN EXPECTED, YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Two out of three participants experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Event. One in eight had SIX or more. These high ACE scores can affect not just our health, but also how we react to our own family (and the world). Let's first look at the health results.

What most surprised the team of researchers was that participants' ACEs were linked to [seven of the top ten causes of natural death in adults](#).<sup>5</sup> These included heart disease, cancer, chronic inflammation, autoimmune diseases, migraines, chronic fatigue, depression, anxiety, ADHD, and memory loss. ACEs can also cause self-destructive behaviors like smoking that lead to poor health.

If you are a woman, every ACE point raises your chance of being hospitalized with an autoimmune disease, such as hyperthyroidism, lupus, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, or celiac disease, by 20%. For men, your risk increases by 10% for every ACE point.

#### **ACEs score of 2 or higher**

- 2x more likely to repeat a grade in school

#### **5x more likely to have ADHD**

- ACEs score of 4 or higher

- 2x more likely to be diagnosed with cancer in your lifetime

- 2.5x more likely to experience chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

- 2.5x more likely to suffer liver disease

#### **ACEs score of 6 or higher**

- 4.5x more likely to suffer clinical depression

- 12x more likely to attempt suicide

- 20 years shorter life span

#### **ACEs score of 7 or higher**

- 3x more likely to be diagnosed with lung cancer.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9635069>

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### CYCLE OF TRAUMA

With the support of her coach, and her husband, Kim makes significant improvements as she understands how her past has affected her present. But she doesn't have a breakthrough until she learns that people who are raised with ACEs have gone through actual physical, neurobiological changes as a result of that abuse that can make them less able to respond appropriately to their own children. This can create a cycle of trauma. Our emotional state is our child's emotional state; if we are still suffering, most likely, they will as well. Understanding how toxic stress is passed down from one generation to the next can help us heal in the present. We know it's not easy, but just starting with awareness is a great first step.

**Rest assured, the brain is repairable, and it is very possible for us to mend, to transform our lives, and to break the cycle of trauma. Once we can comprehend how childhood trauma has impacted our own body and brain, we can begin to identify how we're stuck, and start the next step: our healing journey.**

### COMPASSION

As we mentioned earlier, the very act of understanding what happened to us in our own childhood is healing. First, it lets us change the very filter through which we see ourselves and our lives. Seeing and acknowledging the ACEs helps us to connect the dots of our present behavior (for example, understanding why we're suffering from migraines, or can't stop smoking, or yell at our kids even though we keep saying we want to stop).

The second reason to understand what happened is that it allows us to open up our hearts to compassion for ourselves. With compassion, we can look at ourselves and others with understanding and care, instead of judgment. Compassion is the key to healing. When compassion grows in our hearts, we will begin to experience less pain and suffering and become unstuck. Compassion guides us towards healthy living, a longer life, as well as peace and happiness. Compassion can help us heal our relationship with our children in the present. Knowing where our behavior comes from can allow us to move forward.

In *Wrestling Ghosts*, Kim is dissatisfied with how she is raising her kids. She wishes she could just do better. To her therapist, she says, "I wish I could just tell myself to knock it off and be normal, healthy, good, happy, loving, productive." It isn't until Kim is finally able to see herself as a 9-year-old girl who had lived in a battered women's shelter that she has compassion for what she went through. This is a huge step toward her healing process.

In the following sections, we'll learn about the many ways that Kim was able to shift her self-perception. And no, this stuff isn't easy. We know that; we're here to support you while you find that compassion for yourself!



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### PART 2: UNDERSTANDING HEALING MODALITIES AND THE RECOVERY PROCESS

#### RADICAL SELF CARE

In Wrestling Ghosts, we observe Kim's healing journey: her pain at realizing she is not the mom she wants to be, her discovery of what's preventing her from connecting with her kids, and her breakthrough as she experiences some joy with her family and deepens her connection with her husband. The big question is: how do we begin to heal ourselves, which will in turn heal our relationship with our children and outfit them with a resilient nervous system to prepare them for the future?

We start our healing journey by realizing that by healing ourselves first, we can heal our families. We put our oxygen masks on FIRST! Remember, [our nervous system is the container](#).<sup>6</sup> Our well-being affects our children: when we are overwhelmed, tired, depressed, or anxious, or all of those combined, we tend to respond inappropriately toward our children. This can manifest in different ways — we don't notice them, or we scream at them, or we punish them. We overreact or underreact to our kids.

Because our children need us to heal, this next section will focus on US! This is not self-indulgent; on the contrary, it's necessary for us to [PRIORITIZE](#) <sup>7</sup> ourselves in order to support our children. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/peaceful-parents-happy-kids/201401/committing-radical-self-care>) We call this Radical Self Care. We prioritize our own healing because that's the most important thing we can do for our families. And don't worry, we'll have lots of opportunity to support our children along the way, too!

In the following pages, we'll investigate and present proven methods for healing. All the methods we present are supported by extensive research. there's no wrong entry-point into healing. As you review the various methods we present, allow yourself to start with the tool that feels most compelling. This is your process and it's ok to trust yourself as you take these first steps.

First, we'll explore the basic lifestyle changes that can rewire our brain, calm us, and bring stability to our lives. These healing methods may seem small or even mundane but they are impactful.

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6 <https://www.parentingforbrain.com/self-regulation-toddler-temper-tantrums/>

7 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/peaceful-parents-happy-kids/201401/committing-radical-self-care>

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### REST

Rest is a basic human need, yet most of us don't get enough of it. This lack is not as obvious as thirst or hunger. Without sleep, the damage to our brain function is enormous and makes everyday activities more difficult. [Without enough rest](#),<sup>8</sup> we can gain weight, experience confused thinking, suffer from depression and anxiety. Rest lets us form and maintain new [neurological](#)<sup>9</sup> pathways that help us concentrate, create new memories, and respond more quickly in our everyday life. Sleep builds inner organs like our hearts and lungs, it regulates our hormones (yes, that includes our sex drive!) and metabolism, it protects our immune systems and our moods.

Is it any wonder that without rest, we become irritable with our families?

We know how difficult it is to prioritize sleep when we have so much to do and so little time. Maybe we stay up a little too late in order to grab some "me" time? And yet, getting rest is key to allowing us to be so much more effective in our work and in relationships, especially with our children. And sleep is free!

Perhaps we can't sleep at all. The Division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School offers some great tips to improve the quality and quantity of our sleep. These [tips](#)<sup>10</sup> apply to our kids too. Establishing a nighttime routine of relaxing activities such as trading screens for books, avoiding stimulants like sugar, and exercising during the day, can help our kids get better rest. Making sure our kids understand how important sleep is to their health can go a long way to building good habits in self-care for them, too.

### MOVEMENT

Movement heals your brain and lets you be more energized and present in your life. Think of this: exercise is a well-researched method of [reducing stress](#)<sup>11</sup>, lowering inflammation, boosting energy, and [preventing diseases](#)<sup>12</sup> such as heart disease, stroke, cancer. It's known to undo the damage done to our body and brain because of childhood trauma!

Remember the startling statistic we presented earlier, that the brain's hippocampus can be

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8 <https://www.healthline.com/health/sleep-deprivation/effects-on-body>

9 <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Understanding-Sleep>

10 <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/getting/overcoming/tips>

11 <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-sleeping-is-so-important-to-your-brain-2015-9>

12 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/11/101115074040.htm>

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up to 7% smaller and atrophied in individuals who have experienced ACEs? Well, exercise can regrow it! If you're not motivated to prioritize movement yet, watch this eye-opening [TED talk](#)<sup>13</sup> in which neuroscientist and author Wendy Suzuki presents her research on the incredible benefits of exercise on the brain's anatomy, physiology and function.

We've done it a million times: made New Year's resolutions to exercise more. And when we don't achieve this, we beat ourselves up. But remember, putting our oxygen mask on first means prioritizing movement: making room for it in gentle, consistent ways. Start where you are. Even [small amounts of exercise](#)<sup>14</sup> in our daily lives can improve our quality of life and our relationships with our children. Walking the dog (or a friend's dog!), skipping a subway stop on the way to work, or using stairs instead of the elevator are some simple ways to move more. Like with rest, we want to try to build exercise into our lives, to prioritize it. Find a friend to walk with — an exercise buddy can help us to stay motivated. [App](#)<sup>15</sup> like MyFitnessPal or BetterMe can help us connect with a wide range of people who enjoy exercise. Exercise is hard when we don't feel well, so see if we can find movement that brings us JOY: dance to our favorite music (who doesn't like a spontaneous dance party?), or find community exercise and dance classes like Zumba, salsa, or jazz. Consider taking a stroll in a nearby park or forest. [Studies show](#)<sup>16</sup> that exercising in nature can improve our senses and calm our overactive brain. Choose an activity that makes you happy! There's a triple benefit if we can include our kids in our exercise. We can go hiking together, toss a baseball or frisbee, or help them climb a tree!

We can let them bike (or bike with them) to school. Starting in small ways can provide the whole family with the exercise we need. Especially our school age kids, who might have little recess or outdoor play time.

Remember, tiny steps toward healing are all it takes to get going. We know you can do it!

## NOURISHING OURSELVES

For many of us, food is loaded with shame, anxiety, and self-loathing. We use food in self-destructive ways, to punish ourselves and to medicate feelings we can't deal with. Food is a tough subject for many of us, we understand! In fact, childhood trauma is also [linked to obesity](#)<sup>17</sup> and explains why, for a subset of obese people, nutrition and diet often do not have the impact we desire. Protecting and improving our health (and possibly losing weight),

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13 [https://www.ted.com/talks/wendy\\_suzuki\\_the\\_brain\\_changing\\_benefits\\_of\\_exercise](https://www.ted.com/talks/wendy_suzuki_the_brain_changing_benefits_of_exercise)

14 <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/short-bursts-exercise-reduce-americans-risk-disease-death/story?id=53961659>

15 <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/best-workout-apps-2018-workout-stepping-foot-gym/story?id=52115331>

16 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/01/call-to-wild/>

17 <https://acestoohigh.com/2012/05/23/toxic-stress-from-childhood-trauma-causes-obesity-too/>

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therefore, has to focus on healing our nervous system, reducing inflammation, and healing our brain.

We want to start thinking about shifting our thoughts around food so that it represents the nourishment our body needs and deserves. Remember, healing is all about compassion, self-love, and self-care. And indeed, good food is healing!

Research has shown that [gut health](#)<sup>18</sup> (the good bacteria that inhabit our digestive tract) is directly related to our overall health. A healthy gut can affect those of us struggling with [depression](#)<sup>19</sup>, [anxiety](#)<sup>19</sup>, [autoimmune disorders](#)<sup>20</sup>, and/or [obesity](#)<sup>21</sup>. So, our goal is to develop a way of nourishment that heals our gut, replenishes healthy bacteria, and reduces inflammation.

Most likely, you've heard that nourishing meals are centered around whole, unprocessed foods, but in a culture where we're inundated with fast food and junk food, making changes isn't easy. Start where you are: make one (additional) healthy choice a day, like substituting a processed food for a whole food. Here's a simple strategy for sticking to whole foods: stay away from packaged foods. Avoid foods that have ingredients you can't pronounce. There are many nutritious meals that are [easy and quick](#)<sup>22</sup> to make. (We also recommend reducing or eliminating alcohol and sugar.) Check out our blog posts for more information on an anti-inflammation diet and recipes for beginners!

We want you to stay healthy so that you can stick around and be there for yourselves and your families. Once you learn about nutrition for yourself, you can begin to share health tips with your kids. Remember, kids reflect our behavior. If they see how we take care of ourselves, they will learn how to care for themselves.

Another part of healing can include our mindfulness and our inner peace. In the next section, we'll take a look at how to use our thoughts FOR healing, instead of AGAINST it.

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18 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/the-gut-brain-connection>

19 <https://kellybroganmd.com/depression-starts-in-your-gut/>

20 <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/autoimmune-disease-gut-health>

21 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-gut-bacteria-help-make-us-fat-and-thin/>

22 <https://www.foodnetwork.com/healthy/packages/healthy-every-week/quick-and-simple>

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### MEDITATION AND RELAXATION PRACTICES

One of the [most effective](#)<sup>23</sup> and [heavily researched](#)<sup>24</sup> methods of healing the brain is meditation. [Now and Zen](#)<sup>25</sup> is a series of articles from the Harvard Medical School on how mindfulness can change both brain and overall health. These articles will give you a great overview of the amazing range of benefits we can get from meditation.

What is meditation, exactly? How can it help us? Meditation is an ancient practice of focusing on breath, or repeated mantras in order to quiet our minds. For people with ACEs, it can soothe our nervous systems and bring us back to the present moment.

Meditation can not only have a tremendous impact on our nervous system and our health, but it can help us become more self-aware and intentional. Many of us are not in touch with what we're thinking and feeling. As a result, there's no pause before we react to situations. Meditation can give us the opportunity to simply observe our thoughts and feelings. We can get to know ourselves and, equally importantly, we can learn to gently guide ourselves back to our breath. This allows us to nurture awareness and build our capacity for choice. The result is changed attitudes and behavior that not only benefit us, but those around us. Our relationships with family, friends, and even coworkers can begin to change.

As we develop mindfulness, we may become aware of a lot of negative self-talk. When we come from a home with toxic stress, we can develop a less-than-optimistic outlook on life. We can have feelings of shame, or experience low self esteem. But these attitudes can be transformed. This article/blog outlines some practices, such as gratitude and loving-kindness, that will help you nourish healthy, happy brain habits.

One note: Meditation can be difficult. While we know it's transformative, it may not be for you. At least not yet. At the moment, meditation may surface traumatic events that we're not ready to handle right now. Reassure yourself that you are important. Know that there are many alternative practices that can feel safe and soothe our nervous systems and rewire our thinking, such as guided meditation, relaxation, [yoga nidra](#), and breathing exercises.

Consider learning some of these breathing exercises with your kids. Who doesn't want calm, focused kids? Let them pick some of the more fun [breath work](#), like Flower Breath (where we imagine ourselves inhaling the gorgeous scents of a field of flowers), or Woodchopper Breath (which includes a playful physical element.) Try these before school, or any time kids need to calm down.

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23 <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/how-meditation-may-change-the-brain/>

24 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2016/07/14/stress-literally-shrinks-your-brain-7-ways-to-reverse-the-damage>

25 <https://hms.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/assets/Harvard%20Now%20and%20Zen%20Reading%20Materials.pdf>

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### EASY DOES IT!

Perhaps you're inspired and motivated. That's awesome! Just be aware that getting burnt out is a possibility. We may be exhausted by the kind of intense emotions that surface during the process. We have to allow ourselves permission to REST when we need it.

Feeling empowered by your willingness to change your life may bring thoughts like, "I'm going to exercise five times a week, go to bed every day at 10PM, meditate every morning, and I'll start the Whole30 diet tomorrow!" Careful. It's easy for us to set ourselves up for failure. Let this healing process be an exercise in cultivating gentleness that will last a lifetime, not getting results as soon as possible!

For most of us, it's easier to show up and be supportive with others than with ourselves. Think of how we'd gently support a friend. If he was trying to get more movement in his life, we might offer to go on a hike. If that friend wanted to take the next week off, we probably wouldn't judge or chastise him. Now give that same loving encouragement to yourself. It's all about progress not perfection.

### THE THERAPY JOURNEY

In the coming sections, we'll dive a deeper into Wrestling Ghosts to have a look at Kim's therapeutic journey and the various methods she and her coaches used to help her successfully face her blocks head-on. We highly recommend watching the film for a fuller understanding of the techniques she used.

Before we go much further, we want to say that there are many forms of talk therapy. Probably the most important part of a therapy journey is choosing the right therapist. Make sure your coach or therapist is trauma-informed (knows about ACEs). Choosing a therapist can be really hard. We loved this [New York Times article](#)<sup>26</sup>, it's full of very specific advice that is likely to help you find the right person for you.

In addition to therapy, Kim was encouraged to JOURNAL. Journaling is a powerful healing tool that we can do on our own. Studies show that [writing down our bad experiences is healing](#)<sup>27</sup>. It reduces our stress and even improves immune function. And it's something we can encourage in our children, to allow them to safely express their feelings on paper.

Now, let's look at the first therapeutic method available to us.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/smarter-living/how-to-find-the-right-therapist.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.apa.org/research/action/writing>

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### GETTING OUR NEEDS MET

#### NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC) COACHING

The label may sound dramatic, but the concept is simple. NVC is a [four part process](#)<sup>28</sup> that allows us to discover what we're feeling and needing (and what our loved ones are feeling and needing) and teaches us how to communicate so we can get our needs met. It's a mindfulness practice that lets us hear what's going on in our heads with clarity.

In Wrestling Ghosts, Joshua Hathaway is Kim and Matt's NVC coach. He shows them how to move from judgment and blame to understanding and compassion for themselves and each other. In one instance, with Joshua's help, Kim is able to understand that the names she calls herself "lazy, broken, selfish" are her inner "Mean Voice." Joshua helps her identify that her Mean Voice has a need: to feel competent, to contribute to the wellbeing of her family, to feel whole. Instead of shunning the voice (which we all know doesn't work!), she can now feel compassion for her and soothe her.

NVC also allows us to connect deeply with our loved ones. In this clip, we see how Kim shares her despair with Matt. See how Matt, prompted by Joshua, reflects and repeats what he hears Kim say and makes some guesses about her feelings. As a result, Kim feels heard and the two of them are closer, more connected.

NVC is a powerful skill to develop in parenting, as well. Ana Joanes, the director of Wrestling Ghosts and mother of 3, was inspired to make this movie by reading "Parenting From Your Heart" about NVC parenting by Inbal Kashtan. NVC teaches us how to reconnect with our children after a disconnect. It's a tool that helps us truly listen to our children and to untangle our fears about them. NVC teaches a lot of practical skills and helps us build more JOY and CONNECTION in our families.

The principles of NVC are simple but the practice is hard: most of us have not learned to connect with our feelings and needs. What's truly wonderful about NVC is that it's a skill you can learn and practice on your own. Taking a class or getting coaching is amazing, but NVC is free to learn and practice. We highly recommend starting by reading "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life" By Marshall Rosenberg.

Check out our intro class, or the great online resources offered by the [Bay Area NVC Academy](#).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/learn-nonviolent-communication/4-part-nvc/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://baynvc.org/>

# WRESTLING GHOSTS

## EXPLORING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND HEALING

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### TAPPING OUR GHOSTS

#### EMOTIONAL FREEDOM TECHNIQUE (EFT)

With the right therapist, [EFT](#)<sup>30</sup> is a great tool to keep us centered and in the present while probing our painful past. “Tapping” helps us stay in that uncomfortable place while taking the negative charge out of a memory. Often, we are so good at moving away from pain and discomfort that bad memories keep a hold on us (maybe in a physical way, by holding our brain hostage). We tap until we’ve drained the negative charge from the bad memory. All that’s left is the memory without the damaging impact on us in the present.

With [Victor Lee Lewis](#)<sup>31</sup>, a “tapping” coach, Kim is able to push past some stuck areas on her healing journey. Notice how he has her continue to tap herself throughout their meeting. Once we understand the basic ideas of EFT, we can practice on our own or with the help of a therapist. Note that EFT is a controversial method, and has not yet been proven successful for treatment.

With tapping, we can loosen the straightjacket that’s kept us tied up. We can lead a fuller life.

### YOUR BRAIN DOESN'T LIE

#### NEUROFEEDBACK

The basic idea of [neurofeedback](#)<sup>32</sup> is training in self-regulation, which allows our central nervous system to function better. During neurofeedback, we observe our own brain in action from moment to moment in order to understand how it responds to outside stimulus and our thoughts. When we start changing activity to more appropriate patterns, we reward our brain. This is a gradual learning process. Neurofeedback is also called EEG Biofeedback, because it is based on electrical brain activity.

Neurofeedback addresses problems of brain dysregulation like the anxiety-depression spectrum, attention deficits, behavior disorders, various sleep disorders, headaches and migraines, PMS, and emotional disturbances. It is also useful for organic brain conditions such as seizures, the autism spectrum, and cerebral palsy.

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30 <https://victorlewis.vpweb.com/What-is-EFT>

31 <https://victorlewis.vpweb.com/About-Victor-Lee-Lewis>

32 <http://www.seberfisher.com/neurofeedback-in-the-treatment-of-developmental-trauma/>



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As we watch Kim's experience with neurofeedback in this clip, notice her powerful response when she actually sees on the computer screen the ways in which she is stuck!

Dr. Dan explains that her "hyperarousal" is caused by childhood trauma. [Hyperarousal](#)<sup>33</sup> is correlated with low social/emotional decision-making abilities, sleep difficulty, and low motivation, among a host of other problems. He works with Kim to reduce her hyperarousal, teaching her brain to function more efficiently.

NVC, EFT, and neurofeedback were the three main therapies Kim used in Wrestling Ghosts. But there are many others available to us.

## FINDING WHAT FITS

Aside from the three therapy methods that Kim used (NVC, EFT, neurofeedback), there are many other approaches to healing! We've selected a few more to introduce to you. We hope to share more in our blog soon. Sign up to our mailing list to get updates on our articles and offerings.

Pick just one or two, and take baby steps onto the path to healing. Our healing results will show up in many places in our lives, with our relationships to our partners and children, in our work lives, in achieving our dreams — or even having dreams for ourselves! Slow and steady wins the race.

It's hard to seek help, often we don't think we deserve it (children who have experienced trauma often blame themselves). We've internalized messages from our caregivers that we're not worth it, that we stink, are stupid, and just not good enough. So how do we start to believe we deserve help? By practicing the saying, "fake it 'til you make it."

## EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING (EMDR):

[EMDR](#)<sup>34</sup> uses our eye movements, combined with a therapist's hand movements, to retrain our brain around traumatic events. This helps us shift our thoughts from negative to positive, and helps us heal. It has been related to healing on a physical level, by unblocking the brain's information processing system.

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33 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/10/171031120311.htm>

34 <http://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>

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### GROUP THERAPY:

For therapy with a group dynamic, and more support from a larger amount of people, group therapy can be helpful. Members can provide advice, lend social support, and put things into perspective by sharing their experiences. [Group therapy](#)<sup>35</sup> can also be a more affordable option.

### BODY OR ENERGY-CENTERED THERAPIES (OUR TERM):

Many therapies that focus on the body and our vital energies can support our healing by reducing pain and inflammation, soothing our nervous systems, and building our connection and trust. These therapies can include: acupuncture, massage therapy, craniosacral therapy, hypnotherapy, pet or equine therapy.

Healing is possible for every one of us. We all deserve to heal, and so do our children. The methods we've outlined offer definite improvements. Scientific data back them up. You are not in this alone; you can seek help, healing, and a beautiful life!

## CONNECTION. THAT'S THE KEY.

Our healing journey can come in many forms, but the essential one is CONNECTION. Connection to others can give us structure and help us to stay committed to our growth. Our childhood trauma happened through our closest relationships. Sometimes, that makes us afraid to connect, and we isolate. Social and emotional isolation can cause depression, anxiety, and [other health issues](#)<sup>36</sup>. But healing also happens through relationships. [Humans need each other](#)<sup>37</sup>; we need to feel we are not alone, we need to share stories and create meaningful connections. Even introverts crave valuable relationships!

It is the quality of the connection that counts. [Studies have shown](#)<sup>38</sup> that the type of therapy we choose is less important than our relationship with our therapist. The same goes for other relationships we might be building: exercise buddies to stay motivated, new friends in meditation class, a cooking circle for healthy foods. And of course, the relationship with our family. Healthy connections keep us strong.

We want to offer you a process to create a healing community. Through hosting a screening of Wrestling Ghosts, we can help you inform others about the dramatic effects of childhood

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35 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-therapy/201305/what-about-group-therapy>

36 <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/isolation>

37 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-we-are-wired-to-connect/>

38 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201612/the-importance-the-relationship-in-therapy>

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trauma, and the healing that is possible. A screening is also an opportunity to connect with the people in your community that might become healing partners! Information on [how to screen the film](#)<sup>39</sup> can be found here.

After watching the movie, we encourage you to consider creating what we call a healing pod. Simply put, a healing pod is a group of local friends who meet regularly, share struggles openly, and support each other in their healing journey. As [Dr. Brené Brown](#)<sup>40</sup> says: “In our culture, we associate vulnerability with emotions we want to avoid such as fear, shame, and uncertainty. Yet we too often lose sight of the fact that vulnerability is also the birthplace of joy, belonging, creativity, authenticity, and love.” Healing pods can be as small or big as you wish. It can be members of your book group, or just you and your partner. You can find a [discussion guide here](#)<sup>41</sup> to stimulate conversation after the movie.

We don’t have to be on this journey alone. We can invite others to join us, to help us stay accountable to ourselves, to keep us excited about our healing process. We can create partnerships to remind us to eat right, get some rest, go to yoga, or therapy. As the Dalai Lama reminds us: “Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.”

## LET’S WRESTLE OUR GHOSTS TOGETHER.

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39 <https://www.wrestlingghosts.com/host-a-screening/>

40 <https://brenbrown.com/>

41 <https://www.wrestlingghosts.com/discussion-guide/>

# WRESTLING GHOSTS

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## DIRECTOR

Ana Joanes

## PRODUCERS

Ana Joanes & Toni Nagy

## EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Regina K. Scully, GERALYN White Dreyfus,  
Dan Cogan & Jenny Raskin.

## EDITOR

Mona Davis

## COMPOSER:

Kathryn Bostic

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