

WHEN YOUR CHILD IS HURTING

From Helpless to Healing

A guidebook from one who has been there.



AMANDA-LEE PITZER
SMART LIVING IN SMALL BITES

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Boys, thank you for always letting me be honest and tell our story—but this time it is your story. Telling our stories is the best way to help others find their way through the darkness, and I'm exceedingly proud of your courage as we have walked through this together. I didn't always get it right, but I hope you saw that I was always willing to learn and grow and be your advocate. Thank you for not just working to heal, but for stepping into uncomfortable spaces with me to help others.

Grit and Grace Life: Thank you for being a light during my dark days. I found you about a year before I was widowed, and I clung to so many beautiful beacons of hope. Thank you for giving me a place to land as a new widow with words I needed to spill onto the page. Thank you for encouraging my growth and cheering me on as my ashes turned into something beautiful.



DEAR READER

There is no pain quite like seeing your child suffer.

Not long ago, I watched as my children navigated the loss of their father to suicide. I wanted to help—I *needed* to help—but the more I tried, the worse it seemed to get. As mothers, our instinct is to fix, to comfort, to make things better. But sometimes, we don't know *how* to help. And that uncertainty can leave us feeling powerless, like we've somehow failed them.

Maybe your child has endured unimaginable loss, abuse, neglect, bullying, divorce, chronic illness, or the challenges that come with being a military family. No matter what the source, suffering takes its toll.

For my children, the loss they experienced wasn't just about their father—it was also about the loss of the family they once knew and the challenge of blending into a new one. Even as we moved forward and found happiness in this new chapter, I didn't fully realize they were *still* struggling to process their trauma. Years later, they were *still* reacting to the pain, even as I thought we had moved past it.

When I finally saw it—when someone pointed it out—I felt like I had failed them. I had convinced myself they were “fine.”

They weren't.

But, as I learned more about the long-term impact of trauma on children, I realized that they would be okay—because now I know better.

And I want to help *you* know better, too.

This book is my way of passing along what I've learned so that you can be better equipped to help your child process their pain and heal from the hurts they have endured.

You are not a failure.

And there is *always* hope.

From a doctor who studies it and a mom who's lived it,

Amanda-Lee

MY STORY

Days before my husband took his own life, I finally began to see that there was something terribly wrong with him. His behavior—which I thought was caused by stress—was actually much more serious. He had become self-destructive, verbally and emotionally abusive, withdrawn, addiction seeking, and paranoid. With my eyes opened to what I now believed was a mental health issue, I knew it was time to get help. His therapist’s office was closed for the holidays, so I waited until I could pick up the phone and see about what I could do. I knew he needed help, but I didn’t know just how critical it had become.

In the years leading up to his death, specifically the last five or so, he had become a mean, hateful, spiteful person. Not just towards me, but toward our children as well. I spent an increasing amount of time walking on eggshells to keep him from getting angry with me in front of the kids. However, sometimes it didn’t work, and he would lash out, screaming, cursing, and telling me what a failure I was. Overall, I thought I had done a pretty good job of shielding the boys from his increasing bad moods and outbursts. However, at times, one of them would ask me, “Why does Daddy say he doesn’t want you?” and “Why does he scream at you and use bad words?”

Over time, his anger went beyond me and more frequently was pointed toward them. I tried to make it better by explaining his behavior away ...“Daddy is stressed at work,” or “Daddy is just tired,” or even, “Mommy” said something she shouldn’t have.” I said anything I could

think of to make it seem *normal*. But inside, I was breaking. I felt utterly exhausted from trying to hold everyone together (or sometimes apart) all at the same time. I refused to admit that this was abuse, and, at times, I believed the excuses I told the boys. If I were to admit it was abuse, how could I stay? How could I be a good mom and let them experience this type of upbringing?

One afternoon, the boys were fighting like brothers sometimes do when their dad lost his cool and screamed at them. He then proceeded to break their toys in a violent fashion as “punishment” for their behavior. He demonstrated with great fanfare—breaking the Nerf gun over his knee as it shattered into pieces—and my heart broke as I heard the boys yell “NO!” while watching. He told them they deserved it. They didn’t deserve it.

As he stormed off, I wrapped my babies in my arms as soon as he wasn’t there to see it (because he would tell me to stop coddling them), and I told them how sorry I was. What else could I do? I struggled with knowing if it was punishment for fighting or if it was excessive. I spent a lot of time wondering about this and trying to walk both sides of the line as I tried to mesh the two trains of thought.

Another time, my son messed up at the baseball field. This resulted in his father yelling profanities for all to hear before hopping into his car and speeding off, his tires flinging rocks as he peeled off. When we arrived at home after the game, he proceeded to give our son the silent treatment until he was ready to talk to him—and when he did, he only put him down for his mistake.

The rest of the author's story has been intentionally removed. To read more, [the entire book is available on Amazon.](#)



"A dysregulated child is not giving you a hard time; they are having a hard time."

—Dr. Becky Kennedy



"Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health."

—Bessel van der Kolk

PROBLEMS TO FACE

Because of everything my kids and I have been through, I've spent a great deal of time studying trauma and its effects. After diving in, I realized that I wanted to help others through life's unexpected challenges and found a new purpose for my own life. I decided to go back to school and earned a doctoral degree in educational psychology with a focus on trauma studies and a post-master's certificate in trauma-informed educational practice. That being said, for this section of the book, I'm going to put on my "doctor hat"—the one I wish someone had put on for me when our journey first began.

First, we need to define what trauma actually is. Terr (1991) described trauma as *"the mental result of one sudden external blow or a series of blows, rendering the young person temporarily helpless and breaking past ordinary coping and defensive operations"* (p. 11). I appreciate this definition because it keeps the focus on the child's ability to cope rather than on the event itself. If a child is struggling to cope, then something has been traumatic for them—regardless of whether we, as adults, perceive it that way.

Trauma varies in type and severity, which is why a broader term has emerged in discussions about childhood adversity: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

ACEs fall into two general categories:

- Traumatic Events – These are single, impactful experiences such as abuse, witnessing violence, or losing a loved one to suicide. (This list is far from exhaustive; many experiences qualify as trauma.)
- Unsafe Environments – These are ongoing situations that undermine a child’s sense of safety and security. Examples include having an incarcerated parent, growing up in a home with mental health or substance abuse struggles, living with a chronically ill family member, experiencing bullying, or navigating parental separation.

Along with these different types of trauma, there are varying degrees of severity. According to the CDC, 64% of adults report experiencing at least one ACE before the age of 18. While children may not always have the words to express their experiences, we should assume this statistic applies to the children in our care.

As adults, we must remember that what we might not view as traumatic can still be deeply distressing for a child. Their brains are not fully developed, and they lack the cognitive ability to process events the way we do. Our role is to provide them the space to process their emotions in a way that makes sense for them—and to walk alongside them on their healing journey. By understanding trauma’s impact on the brain and nervous system, we can be the steady presence that helps counteract its effects.

There are two key things to keep in mind:

1. Healing isn't linear.
2. Progress doesn't follow a straight path. A child may make incredible strides, only to suddenly encounter a trigger that sends them right back into a trauma response. This is normal. Healing is a process, not a destination.

It is also worth mentioning that helping your child may bring up struggles of your own.

You know that saying, "*You're only as happy as your unhappiest child*"? I've been there. Supporting a child through trauma can take an emotional toll. Secondary traumatic stress is real. Whether you are a parent, teacher, therapist, or another trusted adult, it's crucial to recognize that this work can impact *you* too. If you find yourself struggling, seek help. You cannot be the steady support a child needs if you are running on empty.

This journey is not easy, but understanding trauma and its effects is the first step toward helping children heal. In doing so, we often find healing for ourselves as well.

Now that we've defined trauma and established a baseline understanding, I will walk you through five common problems that arise when parenting a child who has experienced real pain.



"And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast."

—1 Peter 5:10

We hope you enjoyed this sample. If you're interested in reading more of this book or seeing other books in the series, click on [Amazon](#) to get your copy today.

IS YOUR CHILD REELING FROM A PAINFUL EXPERIENCE?

You've detected a shift in their energy, marked by behavioral changes, withdrawal, and emotional turbulence. How do you begin to help them heal? Do you wish you could talk to someone who's been in your shoes and can offer what you need to help your child recover?

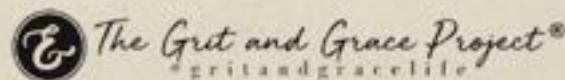
In this guidebook, you will find that woman. You'll also have the chance to:

- *Read her story—a story like yours.*
- *Discover the problems she faced and the steps she took.*
- *Find courage through her confidence and hope.*
- *Pen your own story and struggles on the pages provided.*
- *Take comfort in realizing you don't have to walk alone.*

Your child is burdened by the pain of a past experience or a life-altering change. As they grapple with its impact, you notice worrying changes: their relationships, education, emotional regulation are suffering. More than anything, you want to help them heal.

In *When Your Child Is Hurting*, author Amanda-Lee Pitzer, Ed.D., recounts how her sons struggled to cope in the aftermath of their father's verbal abuse and sudden suicide. Citing research studies and her own background in educational psychology, Amanda-Lee unpacks her boys' uncharacteristic behaviors following their father's passing and the structure she implemented to stabilize their world while they healed.

Another guidebook in the Smart Living in Small Bites Series.



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