



## Episode 139: What Happened To You? Part II (Transcript)

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Hi, welcome to Into the Fold, the Mental Health Podcast. I'm your host Ike Evans, and today we're delighted to bring you episode 139, What Happened to You? Part Two: Why we talk about it. But first, some mental health headlines. At the time of this recording, we are in the middle of National Hispanic Heritage Month. Influencers and activists are using the occasion to push for greater access to mental health services and safe spaces for conversations within Latino communities.

Selena Gomez: Even if it took me a minute to get into it, it's just there and there's something that's really comforting about that.

Ike Evans: That was the one and only Selena Gomez audio, courtesy of ABC News. According to a recent story by ABC News, stars like Selena Gomez and J. Balvin are helping to spread the word. In other news, the Brookings Institution, in partnership with the NAACP, has announced the launching of the Black Progress Index. It is a means to understand the health and wellbeing of black people in the US and the conditions that shape their lives. The index will evolve over the course of the partnership, but for now, it seems that its focus is on finding the places where black people are thriving most, as measured through the social predictors of life expectancy at birth, similar to the social determinants of health, as we're fond of using the term. So in other words, the Black Progress Index identifies and measures the social conditions that predict long and healthy lives for black people in the U.S. If you want to know more about this unique project, you can find it by Googling or on the websites of Brookings or the NAACP.

In Hogg News, we're excited to announce our Safe and Supportive Schools campaign created in partnership with Texas Tribune. Our hope is to change the conversation around school safety to one that actually prioritizes mental health and wellbeing. Toward that end, we have created a special page on our website that aggregates much of our recent content on this issue, and we have published a special op-ed on the Texas Tribune website with the title Safe and Supportive Schools for Every Texas Student. I've included links to both of these in the show description, so if you agree with the views expressed, please discuss

and share them on social media or just with people that you know. So don't be left out of the loop. Subscribe to mental health headlines on the Hogg website, get the latest mental health news right in your inbox.

Our last episode was the first in our series, What happened to You? To explain, we're looking at trauma at both the individual and community level. Trauma is having a moment in our culture. It's a theme of many a film or TV show. It's no longer uncommon for famous people to disclose their traumas publicly. But as with all things, we're here to remind that trauma is not just a thing that randomly happens, but is deeply influenced by social conditions, for example:

- Brain Lopez: So you're really seeing is this community coming together and trying to figure out in which ways they can make change. They know at the end of the day, some of it will come down to them.
- Ike Evans: That voice you heard was from Brian Lopez, Texas Tribune reporter about the ongoing impact of the Robb Elementary School shooting on the community of Uvalde, Texas. Or ...
- Sandy Salinas: I could not imagine what it was like for the students to go back this school year. It does change you. It does change you in the sense that you feel like, are we safe?
- Ike Evans: That was Sandy Salinas of Communities and Schools of Laredo about the lasting trauma of COVID and how communities and schools need to respond. Those experiences belong to this conversation about trauma. Factors like education, economic stability, social connection, neighborhood, community context, build infrastructure, access to healthcare all affect people's exposure to trauma and the resources they have to cope with it. The theme, What Happened to You? is inspired by an acclaimed book, co-authored by our guest today, Dr. Bruce Perry, and the one and only Oprah Winfrey. The book, What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing was published last year and became a New York Times best seller. Dr. Perry, we're so glad that you could join us today.
- Dr. Bruce Perry: Thank you very much. It's my honor. I appreciate the opportunity.
- Ike Evans: Okay, so we were chatting before I began recording, and you mentioned work that you've been doing in Uvalde. I'm sure that our listeners would love to know a little bit more about that.
- Dr. Bruce Perry: Well, I'm part of a very large network of individual professionals in a lot of different walks of life, including education and mental health, and we have programs in organizational affiliations all over the world. Many of them are in Texas, and I practiced, as you may know, in Texas for 20 plus years, so we have a lot of connections in Texas. And we have a long history of working with communities and schools after some of these high profile events. So we have

been talking with individual families that have been impacted by this. We have been working with a group of physicians who are involved in some of the long term planning around the predictable mental health consequences related to this. And we've been providing a little bit of distance supervision and training for a variety of people in different disciplines who are impacted in one way or another by the shooting.

And as I think everybody who's listening knows, Uvalde's choice in this is particularly complex because of the community wide impact on relationships between families and between different groups that were impacted by the shooting, families that have lost children, people that felt betrayed, people that felt thrown under the bus. There's so many confounding and complicated factors. It's going to take a long time for all of this to play out. And I suspect, just like our work in other communities 10 years from now, there will continue to be mental health consequences and problems related to that event.

Ike Evans:

Okay. I want to get to your book, *What Happened to You?* First, I'm curious about how your collaboration with Oprah Winfrey came about and then just getting to the substance of the book itself, the thesis and the evidence that you marshal in support of your thesis about trauma.

Dr. Bruce Perry:

Sure. Sure. I've known Oprah for about over 30 years, and our relationship started out basically because somebody that she knew, knew about my work, and I think most people listening know that she herself was a victim of abuse as a child. And she hadn't at that time gone public with it, but as soon as she went public and talked about her own experiences, she really wanted to try to change things so that what happened to her wouldn't happen to other people. And so a lot of people who have good intentions, she was rather naive about the complexities of just our world. As anybody who's connected to trying to solve mental health issues knows, there are lots of intersecting complexities all the way from trans-generational, historical, systemic issues to individual genetic variations in how people respond to experience. So you can't solve many of these problems simply, but that was her intent.

She wanted to use her influence to try to make changes in the world so that abuse would be obliterated, which was a great aspiration. I mean, it's the aspiration of lots of organizations and people who work in our field. But early on in that process, she wanted to marshal all of the organizations and people involved in this and put them in the same room and come up with a solution. And she invited me to that meeting and I declined. I didn't want to go, and in part because I didn't think that my voice would be heard, and in part because I thought it would be an exercise in futility.

But anyway, one other person declined to come and his name was Andrew Vachss. He was an attorney and a child advocate and really a very smart guy, but also just really a no-nonsense person. And he basically told her, and I told her that I didn't think that this was the way to go about solving these problems, and she canceled that big meeting. And then she invited me and Andrew to a day-

long meeting where we talked about some of the challenges related to this, and that's really where I met her. And from that point forward, we had lots of professional and non-professional interactions.

And when she retired from her show, she became a 60 Minutes correspondent and one of the stories she was doing was about a program working with families and children that were impacted by domestic violence in Milwaukee, and that's one of her hometowns. And she went there and she was talking to people and one of them mentioned that it was a clinical program that was based on our work and that they were working with me. And she said, "Oh, I know Dr. Bruce." So she called me up and asked me to be on the 60 Minutes episode to talk with her about some of this stuff. It was just things that we talked about many times before, and she just wanted it on camera so it could be part of this episode.

And afterwards, her publisher asked her if I would be willing to write a book about this, and I said to Oprah, "I've already written a book about this and nobody is reading it." And the people who are going to be influenced by what I have to say know where to find that information. And so I think you should write the book, Oprah, because people will listen to you and you'll reach an audience that would never ever open up a book by me. And she said, "I don't want to write a book." And we talked about it a little bit and said, "Well, let's write it together." So that's how we ended up deciding to write this book.

Ike Evans: Wow. And if the book does have a thesis, what would you describe it to be, for those who haven't picked it up yet?

Dr. Bruce Perry: Right. Well, I think the most important part of the book is trying to help shift people from being judgmental and focusing on what somebody is doing wrong or what's bad with somebody in the moment, and taking a step back and recognizing that the present behavior, the present functioning is a product of something that happened before now, something happened that led to this behavior in this moment. Now, it might have been, maybe it's an intrauterine insult, maybe it's genetics, maybe it's the way they were treated as a child, but behavior doesn't come out of a vacuum. Something happened that is influencing the way people function.

And when you start to shift from being judgemental to being curious, you are able to be more empathic and understanding of the people in front of you. And for many people, not all, but for many people, what happened to them is that there were disappointments, there was chaos, there was adversity, there was trauma. There were things that they have overcome to be in the present moment. And when you understand somebody's story, you are much more likely to be compassionate and understanding and kind and so forth.

I think one of my favorite quotes is from Abraham Lincoln, who knew this, and he said, he was talking about somebody, I think it was somebody in Congress, and he said, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him." And the point, of course, is that if you do get to know somebody, you can at least understand why

they're acting that way, and it will increase the probability that you'll be, in some way, kinder to them and more compassionate.

Ike Evans: And so, in thinking about this new frame that you were trying to try to usher in through your writings, were there any personal moments for you that really brought home the importance of past trauma or environmental insult, as you put it, and that made it such a keystone concept for you?

Dr. Bruce Perry: I think... It's interesting, I think everybody is a junior psychologist, right? I mean, everybody's trying to figure out why somebody acts a certain way and everybody on the block knows that the kid who's over there getting into trouble that, "Oh, they're on a bad trajectory." There's studies that show that a kindergarten teacher can pick out the two kids in the class who are going to struggle the most in life, just through their observations. So all people know this. All people have an understanding of developmental experiences influencing how people function.

But for me, the most powerful moment came when I was in college and I was just admitted to college. And Stanford was where I went to school, and they had a freshman seminar program. And what they did in that was that they took 12, 15 freshmen, and we would meet every week for the whole year, and we were mentored by one senior faculty member. And I was lucky enough to get into the freshman seminar where the faculty member was a gentleman named Seymour Levine, who was and is one of the pioneers of developmental neuroscience. And he had just conducted a set of experiments in his lab where he demonstrated that ... and he did this in rats and then later on they did it in primates.

But in rats, if you take a baby rat, a newborn rat, and you take that animal away from its mother for a very brief period of time, which is stressful to that animal, and you just hold it in a human hand, a little rat pup hold ... it's called handling stress, but it's pretty overwhelming if you're a rat pup. And then you put that rat back in the cage with the mother and let it grow up just like all the other rats. And then once it becomes a young adult rat, you look at the way that animal responds to stress, and you look at the biology of the brain, you look at how their stress response systems are organized, what you find is that that brief, literally minutes-long experience profoundly changes the biology of the brain, and it profoundly changes the behavior of the animal.

And for me, that was the moment, [inaudible 00:18:06] where I just was like, "Oh, my gosh, you're telling me that a minutes-long experience in the earliest experiences of an animal literally changed the entire trajectory of the development of this system in their body that is crucial for functioning, for exploration, for learning, for managing stressors throughout life?" And it was at that point, I really, that shifted my perspective. And from that point forward, whether as an undergraduate researcher or a graduate researcher getting my PhD, I was studying the development of stress response system and how it can be subtly influenced by the timing of experiences, how experiences can be created that will make that system stronger and more resilient, and how other

patterns of experience lead to vulnerability. And really, the scientific underpinnings of this movement that we're part of, this effort to change a frame of reference, it's been there for many, many, many years.

I mean, the basic neurosciences have been talking about this and studying this for decades. So even before I became a scientist, and I'm an old man, there were people that were studying the impact of certain patterns of stress on the development of the brain and functioning. So this is not a new story, it's an old story. It's just systems take forever to change, and the dominant perspective, the medical model and the current DSM-driven mental health model are going to take a couple decades to overthrow, but they're absolutely inadequate for explaining the current range of issues in the human condition that we need to try to change.

Ike Evans:

So in some respects, trauma is having its moment in the wider culture. It's not uncommon anymore for famous people, Oprah, one of the first, who comes to mind, to share what they have been through. Some might say overshare, if you're looking at this maybe a little more critically. And so if you buy my premise that this is a trend, I mean, what do you think of it?

Dr. Bruce Perry:

Well, I don't buy your premise that it's a trend. I think it's basically the settling in towards something that's true. It's like gravity. I mean, no matter what perspective people take on this, ultimately there will be a convergence on the power of early developmental experiences to shape outcomes. And there will be a convergence on the power of relationships and the importance of relationships. It's like gravity. You can try to deny it, but ultimately it's going to settle in. So, you may call this a trend. There are parts of it that are movement-like and that are just off target, but that's a pendulum swing. Ultimately, the power of factual content is going to drive this.

But I do think that this is like any field, anything, any area where human beings get involved. Human beings are human beings, and we don't change our minds because a bunch of scientists publish a set of recommendations and issue them. Honestly, and this is no offense to the Hogg Foundation or any other organization, but you all have been issuing white papers about topics for years. Those don't change public opinion. What changes people are the storytellers in our society. Human beings are storytelling creatures. That's how we best learn, that's how we best communicate. And so, when the storytellers of our society tell their stories, they end up having powerful impact.

You look at the way different people are talking about their experiences. By and large, it's all well intended. There are people who were sexually exploited as athletes. When they tell their story, Simone Biles telling her story, I think that's good for the field, good for our society. When Oprah shares that she had hardship growing up, I think that that helps other people feel less isolated and less overwhelmed. One of the biggest problems, as you well know, and the Hogg Foundation is, this is part of what you all have been doing, is the stigma about mental health issues. And what better way to destigmatize a topic than to have

somebody who has celebrity status, has high profile status, talk about their own struggles with something. And it humanizes them and it makes others feel as if they're not alone.

So I think that there's the issue of celebrities talking about their experiences or sharing their experiences. I think it has some positive potential value. I do think that there are people that overshare, and that's just a reality. And then there's other people that I think just, I don't want to say misunderstand, but they over label, so everything becomes a trauma and you should look at everything as if it's a trauma. And that's not accurate either. So this is part of what we try to do in this book is help continue to be clear about what is traumatic, what is not traumatic? How do you understand these things? How does it play out in a lot of different arenas and the different walks of life? And I think that the ongoing dialogue about this will only lead to better schools. It'll lead to better mental health services and so forth. I'm happy to have those people come on board and try to engage the public and share their experiences.

Ike Evans: Okay. So the book is *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing*, published in 2021, co-authored by the one and only Oprah Winfrey. We hope that as many people who have a stake in this topic, and Lord knows that covers a big number, that you'll check out the book. Dr. Perry, thank you so much for taking the time to visit with us today.

Dr. Bruce Perry: My pleasure. I appreciate the opportunity and keep up the good work.

Ike Evans: Between the previous episode and what you just heard, we've thrown a lot at you. My friend and wonderful coworker, Anna Harris, is here with us for a quick chat about everything that you just heard. Anna, welcome.

Anna Harris: Thank you. Good to be here.

Ike Evans: So Anna, what is your take on all of this? I know that you'd previously read Bruce Perry's book, and just start anywhere that you like.

Anna Harris: Well, I think my takeaway in general is I'm so glad that we're having this conversation. I remember when I was in school and in even into college, conversations around trauma and its impact on the individual and the communities and all of the ... It's like a ripple effect, dropping a stone into a pond, and having those conversations and seeing the different levels and ways in which this continues to have an impact and will have an impact down the line. My big takeaway is that I'm grateful that we have these types of conversations now.

Ike Evans: And a lot of the discourse around trauma assumes the virtue of being vulnerable. Is vulnerability an idea that holds any special value for you? And that's even if you're only talking about what you've learned while at the Hogg Foundation.

Anna Harris: What a great question and comes with different lenses, right? You can be personally vulnerable, professionally vulnerable. And in my experience at the Hogg Foundation and in life, my takeaway is that vulnerability takes courage because you don't know how that's going to be received, and it's essentially by definition taking off the armor and laying down your arms. But I do think it is the only way that I've been able to grow in both of those spheres is to have the courage to be vulnerable, to speak up when I'd rather just stay comfortable. I think vulnerability interrupts that flow of comfort, but you can't grow if you're constantly comfortable.

Ike Evans: And so, I just dropped you in the middle this episode without a whole lot of fanfare. I'm sure our listeners would love to know a little bit more about you, how you came to be at Hogg, and just your general doings.

Anna Harris: Sure. Yeah. I'm really grateful to be in with the Hogg Foundation. I've previously worked in getting musicians in Austin signed up with Healthcare for the Health Alliance for Austin musicians, used to be a musician myself, but honestly was really --

Speaker 7: [inaudible 00:28:05].

Anna Harris: Oh, that's true.

Ike Evans: Yeah.

Anna Harris: Yes. I still do music quite a bit. Thank you for that reminder. But yeah, I did a lot of work in the non-profit sphere with HAAM and then my own journey with music. I was, believe it or not, a touring violinist for almost seven years, I want to say, and through fate got this opportunity to come work at the Hogg Foundation. I'm the executive assistant to the foundation and to our wonderful executive director, Dr. Martinez, and it's been a ride. And I've been able to synthesize some of those experiences both in music and in direct contact with the community and put it to a new purpose here, so yeah.

Ike Evans: That little wonderful music theme that we've been using for the podcast for a while, is it literally called Anna's Vibes or is that just the name of the file on my computer?

Anna Harris: That's an excellent question. I think that was the name of the file, which then became the name of the song, because my co-writer, Kyra McIntyre, who's actually my cousin, I think both of us were probably just too lazy to rename it. So I guess the short answer is, yes, it's called Anna's Vibes, with a Z.

Ike Evans: And y'all listening are about to hear it again in a few minutes as we get closer to the end. Well, Anna, thank you so much for just taking the time to chat with us today. And yeah, it's really good to see you in person here at our studio and take care.



Anna Harris: Fantastic. Glad to do it. Thank you.

Ike Evans: All right. Bye. And now some closing thoughts. Like Anna said, it is wonderful that our culture is more willing to hold space for these kinds of conversations. She mentioned armor as in the emotional kind, what we take off so we can be vulnerable. Of course, armor has a great deal of utility in a capitalistic culture. So much in our society is predicated on pitting citizen versus citizen, hoarding opportunity, doling out respect and dignity as if they're scarce goods, hard won, but easily lost.

As great as it is when a person embraces vulnerability, we run the risk of over individualizing the problem. Focusing like we do on the structural underpinnings of good mental health, it brings into view the awesome possibility that one day, that armor that we all have to wear to varying degrees will no longer have such utility because working together will have made it obsolete.

And that does it for this episode. We're glad that you could join us. If you have comments on anything, feel free to reach out to us at [Into the Fold at austin.utexas.edu](mailto:Into the Fold at austin.utexas.edu). Thoughtful comments will be acknowledged during a future episode, production assistance by Anna Harris, Darrell Wiggins and Kate Rooney. Please leave a review and subscribe to us on the podcast app of your choice. Taking us out now is Anna's Good Vibes. Thanks for joining us.