

# Hidden Wounds

Category: In Pain

written by Mary Kay Jordan Fleming | February 19, 2018

“Growing up in an abusive home completely changed my outlook on life. There’s no love inside the home, only fear. Eventually, the pain and fear became normal. You’re afraid of your parents but you’re also afraid of a world without them because they’re all you know. You’re anxious, depressed, even suicidal. You have no social skills. It’s a lonely world with no way to cope.”

That was the searing testimony of Wyatt, a thirty-year-old military veteran in my developmental psychology class. On the first night of class, he warned me that he might pace in the back of the room because it was difficult for him to sit still for three hours. Halfway through the course, when I assigned students to explain how child maltreatment affects the developing brain, Wyatt drew a picture with words of what it’s like to grow up without love.

When medical providers care for patients with a history of childhood trauma, they see hypertension, obesity, heart disease, or drug addiction. In the college classroom, that same trauma looks like hypervigilance, panic, and an inability to find purpose or meaning. Students as young as twenty have confided that they provide the only income in a family with an addicted parent or sibling. Or that they now realize they are better off because a toxic parent walked away or was thrown out. Or that sexual abuse left them angry and fearful of intimacy. As pediatrician [Nadine Burke Harris](#) points out, the fight-or-flight response is adaptive when you’re confronted by a bear in the woods, but what happens when the bear lives in your house? And, later, inside your head?

Babies do not get to choose their parents. Those of us who won the lottery of childbirth through no merit of our own have a sacred responsibility to care for those who lost through no fault of their own. I am indebted to Wyatt and others who have lifted their bandages to reveal the lifelong pain of child abuse and neglect.

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