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WENDY MURPHY: Nothing cuts a child like the feeling of betrayal

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QUINCY — When I first met “Julie” we were 4 years old. I moved into a gray house three doors down from where she lived in a little white colonial with green shutters.

We were inseparable for the next decade, except when the other same-aged girl on our street took one of us away from the other, or I took one of them away, etc. Even back then, three little girls rarely played well together.

When we got to junior high, all that seemed silly after Julie stopped coming to school. At first she said it was because she was sick, and they didn’t know what was wrong.

Then one day, she called to tell me she was in a “locked ward” at a local hospital.

“What’s a locked ward?” I asked.

She said it was a section where you can’t get out, and if you try to leave, they chase you.

I assumed it was because her sickness was contagious.

I went to visit Julie the next day. Her eyes were sunken and her skin was gray. Her clothes hung loose on her shockingly thin body and her roommate looked like a zombie. Being a politically incorrect 14 year-old, I asked what was up with the weird roommate. “She’s doing the Thorazine shuffle,” Julie said with a tired half-grin, “because she tried to kill herself.”

“I tried to kill myself, too,” she added.

“Why the hell would you do that?” I asked, incredulous and a bit angry.

“I told my therapist I remembered something terrible. He wanted me to say more but I told him I would die if I remembered anything else. Then I did. It was so awful.”

I stared, confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“My grandfather – the bed – my body – the pain.”

My mouth dropped.

“When I was 7, I told my mother,” Julie continued. “I was crying so hard I couldn’t breathe and she just stared. Then she smacked me and told me never to talk about it again. After that, she sent me to stay with him on weekends.”

Julie put her head down and I could see tears falling to the floor past her jet-black hair.

I couldn’t speak.

Julie’s mom was the kind who baked a cake every day and put it on one of those glass pedestals you see in fancy bakeries. And she packed the best lunches. I’d have a meatball sandwich and cheap crackers from the bulk-food aisle and Julie would have fancy cold cuts, two Pop Tarts, and so many extras her lunch bag was often overflowing. I wanted that perfect life. Hell, I just wanted a Pop Tart once in a while.

Who knew it was all cover?

It’s not that we hadn’t heard about perverts growing up. A guy at the corner store once pulled his pants down in front of Julie. And a teenager in my neighborhood touched me inappropriately, then offered me a nickel not to tell. Of course, I took the nickel and told right away. His dad was a cop so he didn’t get in much trouble. It was weird but never a secret, and my parents did all the right things because they cared about my well-being.

Julie’s mother clearly didn’t feel the same way.

This was almost harder to hear than the abuse itself. Kids depend on relationships of trust to help them grow into loving and healthy adults. When trust is betrayed, it creates a virus in the emotional wiring of a child’s brain.

As Professor Jennifer Freyd, PhD, author of “Betrayal Trauma,” notes, “When abuse occurs in the family it involves high amounts of betrayal and psychological damage because it’s the family’s job to protect the child. If the abuse is then denied, the betrayal is potentially toxic and the child will often suffer serious consequences throughout the lifespan.”

Julie suffered consequences alright.

She stayed in the locked ward for a long time, and never came back to school. When she got out, things were better. She got married at 16 and had three wonderful kids. They know everything, including the part about their grandmother. Openness has helped them deal with Julie’s ongoing severe PTSD and other medical problems related to the abuse.

Julie even found a way to understand her mother's cruelty. Turns out the grandfather had abused her, too, but because nobody talked about it, she never resolved her own issues.

If she had, she'd have known how profoundly helpful it would have been to hug her sobbing child and reveal her own suffering. When mothers share their pain, it empowers children to understand things they're too young to process on their own. It's the best protection against long-term psychological damage.

Julie doesn't exactly forgive her mother and she feels bad about that. So when we have time to talk, I tell her forgiveness is overrated, which always brings us back to what one doctor said to Julie about her mother the day she landed in the locked ward:

"Just because she gave birth to you, doesn't mean she likes you."

The first time Julie heard this, she cried.

These days, it makes both of us laugh.

Wendy Murphy is a leading victims rights advocate and nationally recognized television legal analyst. She is an adjunct professor at New England Law in Boston. She can be reached at wmurphy@nesl.edu. Read more of her columns at [The Daily Beast](#).

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A whole lot of folks ought never have become parents.

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Ms Murphy - You're a good friend to have stayed close by Julie all these years. If only every child had one true friend -oh what a world this would be!

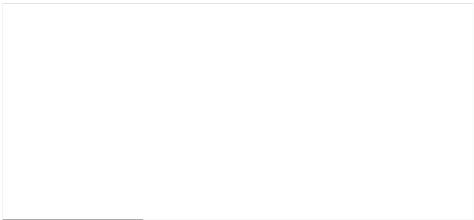
God Bless.

CharRN

3 days ago

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I agree THANK GOD she had you!!! It makes my heart hurt to hear those stories and Makes me hug my kids more--and when I do I'm hugging those poor abused kids that NEVER asked to be in the lives they are given!!! Love to Julie

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