

Season 5 | Episode 19

# Understanding Trauma and Abuse

## Darby Strickland

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**AUGUST 31, 2023**

Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm Crystal Keating. I love bringing you real conversations about disability, finding hope through hardship, and sharing practical ways that you can encourage someone in your life who is struggling. You can learn more about our podcast and find all of the helpful resources we've mentioned on the show at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast).

When someone goes through a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, their wounds can last long after the initial encounter. The trauma of a physical, mental, emotional, or even spiritual wound can have a deep impact, and it often has a messy way of expressing itself. So how can someone carrying a deep wound find hope and healing? Today I'm talking with Christian counselor Darby Strickland about understanding trauma. Working with individuals, families, and couples who face a variety of issues, Darby specializes in counseling abuse in marriage. She teaches at Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation's Online School of Biblical Counseling, leads a support group for oppressed women, speaks at national conferences, and trains counselors and churches to care well for those affected by abuse and trauma. Listen now as she talks about the impact of trauma and how you can share hope and healing in Christ with someone who's been wounded.

Today I am talking with Christian Counselor Darby Strickland, who teaches for the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation's Online School of Biblical Counseling. Her work includes assisting in the development of the curriculum *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, a free web-based training that provides best practices for pastors, ministries, and leaders who minister in the context of abuse.

She is passionate about training churches and counselors to care well for those affected by domestic abuse and come alongside trauma victims. Welcome to the podcast, Darby.

Darby Strickland:

Oh, thank you for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Well, it's great to speak with you and I know your heart beats for those who have suffered trauma to find hope and healing in the Lord Jesus Christ, which is why it's really an honor to speak with you today.



And I thought we'd start our conversation just with an overview of trauma: what it is, how it impacts individuals and their relationships, and then we'll transition into how to have a tenderness for wounded people, and how to come alongside of them, especially when the pain seems to consume a person and when they feel beyond God's help.

So, before we do that, Darby, I'm really interested to hear about your experience as a counselor, and especially one who comes alongside those who have suffered trauma.

Darby Strickland:

When I was freshly graduated college, I wanted to do a year of service and I worked in a shelter for abused and neglected children in the city of Chicago. And it was my first entrance into the evil world of abuse, and I just saw all sorts of horrific trauma perpetrated on children days old through 18.

Just seeing some of the worst cases of abuse that's done to children, it made me want to do Gospel work. In that, in certain environments, secular environments where I was doing some crisis work at the time, I was like sitting on the Gospel and it just really propelled me that Jesus knows what it is like to suffer intimately and deeply, and he has what these people need.

And so, from there, I really wanted to dig in and get to know more of him and his word and what he had to say. And so, after becoming a Christian counselor, I've tended to specialize in the area, or God put a lot of women, I should say. I didn't choose to, but he brought a lot of women victims to me who were struggling with domestic abuse, and I just was caring for women whose marriages were characterized by fear and control for years, sometimes decades. And it's just so very sad to have your marriage be a place of trauma. And they often wouldn't even recognize that what they were enduring was traumatic. So, I've kind of come at it in two different directions, but just really impressed upon me the great need for Jesus that these souls have.

Crystal Keating:

Well, you have been truly impacted by the compassion of Jesus Christ, and I know the same work that he's done in your heart and the powerful scriptures and just the gentleness in which you interact with men and women I know is making a great impact in the lives of those who want freedom, especially in a place where you would think you'd find the most love and safety in a marriage. And you know, as we think about trauma, I'm amazed at how many people write to the ministry of Joni and Friends who have suffered trauma through their lives, and it's impacted them. You know, they write to Joni and say, even though I'm not in a wheelchair, even though I don't have cancer, I don't have paralysis, I do have a disability, and it's an invisible or hidden disability because of what happened to me.

They find trust and hope in Jesus, and especially as Joni explains it, I think they just really resonate with that. So that's been really eye-opening that we can suffer trauma so much that it changes who we are. It shapes our hearts. So, as we think about trauma, how would you define it and what are some of the ways trauma can impact a person's life in the moment and then throughout their lifetime?



Darby Strickland:

Yeah, 'cause trauma is quite a broad category.

Crystal Keating:

It is.

Darby Strickland:

So, I tend to think of it more globally that trauma is caused by deeply distressing or disturbing experiences or an experience that completely overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. The word trauma literally means wound. So, I tend to conceptualize it as someone who's still carrying significant wounds from their experiences that have had lasting adverse effects on their ability to function mentally, physically, socially, emotionally, or spiritually.

Most people tend to think of trauma as PTSD or war victims or abuse victims. And even now, just thinking there's this new category of complex trauma where it goes much longer than an event where someone was raised in a home for decades and years where someone they were supposed to trust betrayed them and harmed them.

And so, some people are more resilient than others, and we don't understand why some people experience the same event, as one's traumatic and another not. So, it is really about that particular's individual capacity to carry that wound.

Crystal Keating:

That's good. That's a good explanation. And you know, I think as we take this really broad concept of trauma and think about woundedness, I think in particular, people with disabilities can suffer trauma, even through things like repeated medical treatments. We've heard about children who have maybe intellectual and physical disabilities who don't understand or are able to articulate what's happening to them or what's happened to them. And that certainly can be traumatic and even experiencing trauma from watching others go through abuse or trauma, it's pervasive.

And that's why the church and those who love Jesus Christ need to bring that truth and that hope up again and again. You know, one of the things you said that I've seen time and a time again, is trauma expressing itself sideways and in messy ways. People with trauma tend to keep others at a distance. Can you kind of talk about that? Maybe there's a circumstance that you're familiar with.

Darby Strickland:

Yeah. I think if we start just really simple, right? We think about a fearful child and talking about who's had some of that medical traumatic stress from chronic medical procedures, and they might be going just for a regular checkup and that day they don't understand, but they don't wanna jump up on that doctor's table.

Crystal Keating:

No.



Darby Strickland:

And they might pitch a fit, right? And people around them are looking at a child who's misbehaving about parents who don't have their child under control. And, but really, it's a child who is filled with fear. But it doesn't look like fear. It looks like I'm digging my heels in and I'm saying no.

And so that all makes sense to us 'cause we've all had children or watched children have fits. But as adults, when we're uncomfortable or we're afraid, we're more sophisticated in how we display that. And we have mechanisms to hide. So again, we just have a sophistication and, and we're hiding. But things still kind of spill out. And you know, you think about a woman who has been assaulted, you know, a victim of assault and now she's walking around her life and her relationships and she's on guard and her body is sensing danger everywhere and she's looking overly anxious. She might isolate herself and keep her friends at a distance.

And so, people in church might look at this young woman and be like, she's so abrasive.

Crystal Keating:  
Right.

Darby Strickland:

And they're making assumptions that you know, she's having a strong reaction if someone reaches out and touches her. And we tend to judge what we do not understand.

Crystal Keating:

So true. Actually, just yesterday I was at Kaiser Hospital and in a waiting room all alone except for a precious mom and her probably 12-year-old son with autism. And he was shrieking nonstop. He was biting her, he was biting himself, he was pulling on her hair, and I just kept looking at them and praying for them and smiling at her. Kind of like, you know, I'm not judging you.

I can kind of see, but I can see that this child was incredibly afraid, and the doctors kept coming in and out. They didn't know what was going on. You nailed it. That's exactly what they were experiencing, a lot of fear. Well, one thing that I think you really focus on, and it's truly the heart of Jesus, you said it well, that those who have suffered trauma are often unseen.

And what is seen is the anger, the resentment, the isolation, the symptoms of abuse and unspeakable hardships. And what we really need to see is the person; see the person with eyes of compassion and not judgment. Can you talk more about that?

Darby Strickland:

Sure. Again, just trying to think of a simple story. I have a friend who one day we were taking a walk with a group of people, and someone came up from behind her just to give her a hug. They were really happy to see her, and she completely freaked out. You know, she turned around, shared a vulgar word and she was paralyzed in fear and betrayed in the same moment that she



felt exposed. You know, I probably was the only person on that walk that knew her personal history, and she had every right to be terrified when someone approached her from behind.

And so, she lived as a person who knew great danger. But now the women around her labeled her as dangerous, that she seemed angry, you know, she dared, uttered an obscenity, and was harsh. And that's all they could see. They, they didn't think to say, why would someone have such a strong reaction to affection?

And it's tragic. Another way I like to think about it is we often don't believe the unbelievable, particularly when there's been abuse. We have a hard time believing that someone else would perpetrate that kind of evil against another, or that someone we know is accused of doing harm. We don't believe it. And so, it is hard for victims to talk about their experiences and be seen and be known because we are so skeptical of them.

We don't believe that those things really happen, and we tend to minimize or dismiss other people even when they just bring up a concern.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's true. You know, the stories that we hear, they are beyond my capacity to understand. And it's beyond heartbreaking. But we know that God knows, and God understands. You know, when I've heard you speak, I know your focus is really beyond the trauma. You focus on knowing the person, believing them, restoring a person's hope in God.

And yet I think it's important for us to better understand trauma, to help us see the person, to see the person. So, with that said, what are the types of wounds that trauma often causes?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah. There're seven categories of woundedness that I regularly see associated with victims. Not all trauma victims have all seven, but they usually have a compilation of some of them. And the first is physical anguish. We know that trauma manifests itself in our bodies physically: have anxiety or panic attacks, or not be able to concentrate, feel fatigued, struggle with sleep or eating, heart palpitations. A lot of chronic and unexplained pain can come from a history of untold trauma stories, stomach aches, headaches, and it really is intolerable to have a body acting this way.

You know, just your body has taken over and it feels out of control and consuming. And many of the people I talk to say they want out of their own skin the physical anguish that accompanies it is, is quite overwhelming. And it's, again, it's just my experience that when a trauma story remains untold, the body does all the talking.

It's kind of putting you on alert saying something serious has happened. The next one would be shame. Shame often accompanies trauma. Sometimes it's the wounds that are left over from the trauma, you know, feeling inadequate. Like, why am I still struggling? Why am I still grieving the loss of my child?



I feel like it's too difficult for me to get over this, or why am I still so fearful? So just shame for their own inability to cope. And really, it's these things are overwhelming and so there should not be shame in not hitting a certain healing trajectory. But also, traumatized people often carry stories with them that condemn. You know, if anyone knew what happened to me, you know, you've been defiled. You're unlovable now or tainted. No man could ever love you now. So just carry with them these heartbreaking lies. You know, if only I did or didn't do this. And so, victims often are left feeling unlovable and disgraced.

And shame is difficult to counter. Ed Welch says it best. He says, shame says you're wrong. It is a large indictment. It's life dominating and stubborn and once entrenched in your heart and mind, it's a squatter that refuses to leave. And it's just imagine having to deal with the actual events or things that harmed you and then you have to deal with this life-dominating shame too. Then they're the faith questions. Sufferers of all kinds, we're always forced to confront deep questions about who God is and what his purposes are. But trauma victims tend to ask, you know, why doesn't God help me or hear me or see me? Does he care about me? And these are good questions we all ask, but in a wounded heart, they're amplified.

And so, we want to help people wrestle with their questions and do so in light of who God is. So, I always encourage people, you wanna see them actually as leaning into the Lord, trying to know and understand him. And their questions are centering around how God is relating to them personally. And so, we wanna be really careful and really listen precisely to their faith questions. And some of the other wounds are ones we're more familiar with is hypervigilance. And we all know it can be experienced physically, like from my earlier example, but it also can be located relationally. Victims are often asking themselves, is the people around me safe?

People have not been trustworthy and trust with them can easily be broken. They're hypersensitive to any harm you might cause them, and that's good. That's what life has taught them. And so, I always say allow them to be always building trust.

Intrusions most commonly, again, we understand that as flashbacks, right? They can be physical, visual, or most people don't know that flashbacks can actually be emotional. That when memories from the past intrude into the present. But oftentimes I will have counselors tell me when they have to go back to the hospital or to a doctor's office, they have these overwhelming emotional memories that are just very disorienting and that make the present experience feel as if it were, they were facing the danger that they experienced in the past. And then sometimes the intrusive thoughts they can be as thoughts like against some of those self-condemnations, constant loop of anxieties.

They just can't turn their minds off. They're trying to make sense of what happened. And they really can't, which I say would like lead to the avoidance. Right? So, another way that a victim would cope would just be with the overwhelming stress and the unresolved problems, is to try to avoid thinking about it.

And some people do that. Like we all do, you know, internet scrolling or watching TV, sleeping, video gaming, but some people employ destructive ways of coping with substance abuse and the

like, and it's an honest way that they're trying to cope. It's not God-honoring, but it's understandable.

Crystal Keating:  
Right.

Darby Strickland:  
And then lastly is just the overwhelmed emotions that, and I usually see this as a good sign that later on when victims are more connected to their own experience, and they then feel what happened to them. But the emotions are usually repetitious, and a floodgate opens and so it, it becomes difficult to manage and they spill over into all of life.

I have people tell me, you know, they're in the shower, they're crying, they're driving their car, they're crying. The tears just can't stop. Or just extreme sadness or anger, depression, and which actually can lead right back to the first one where the emotions can lead you to be physically ill or fatigued.

Crystal Keating:  
I kind of hear what you're saying is, you know, as you see these symptoms, they're signals. Signals that something happened, something's wrong. Those of us who wanna come alongside need to be attentive and very patient and gracious and allow for lots of questions. And for those of us who are biblically trained, I think it's easy to give some good scripture and try to come alongside and help.

But from listening to you for, you know, some of your great messages and even reading your booklets, I know that some of the comments of well-meaning Christians are actually compounding the pain and suffering. So, can you even just maybe list some of those comments that you've heard said to those who are wounded? Yeah, I think we just need to like, just say it.

Darby Strickland:  
Yeah. Sadly, and tragically, right?

Crystal Keating:  
It is.

Darby Strickland:  
You need to trust God more. Or I've seen people send cards with Bible verses in it, like this is how you should be responding to the loss, your loss rather than encouraging you with who God is or what do you think God wants you to learn from this?

Or we'll be praying for your shaken faith that you can honor God more, but not praying for your pain. Like somehow the pain is invalid. A particular one that makes me bananas is you need to find meaning in your suffering. You know, God's trying to teach you something. What do you think you need to learn?



And I just think these comments add isolation and a wrong agenda to grief. You know, it's like as if devastation and loss should feel good or be purposeful. And that's just a huge burden to add to someone who is deeply grieved that there's a lesson in it. I like to encourage people that it's actually okay to be in agony when tragedy comes.

We should not question a person's faith or ask them to have more faith, but figure out how to buttress it. You know, with Jesus, again, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was in agony. He knew what was coming and he was sweating blood and he was asking God, is there any other way? On the cross he cries out, right?

He says, I feel forsaken by God. So, if Jesus can express agony and abandonment, I think we have permission to go to God with similar questions and God wants people to express their hearts. And I think we as a church have to learn to invite those questions and not shut them up or redirect them.

Crystal Keating:

You know, what are some of the most helpful life-giving ways to encourage someone who's suffered trauma?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, that's a great question, 'cause oftentimes when we're looking at those seven wounds, we look at people and we say, what's wrong with you?

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Darby Strickland:

When the question really needs to be, you know, what has happened to you? So, we really wanna try to get to know the person and their story, getting close to them. You know, having that compassion like Jesus does. He came near to his people, and he entered into our sufferings. And so, God calls us to wade into those dark, hard pain, and tearful places in people's lives and just being willing to learn their stories.

Crystal Keating:

And that takes a measure, well, a great measure, I think of grace and prayerfulness and humility on the part of the listener. It's a difficult thing to receive someone's story. You know, those who call us, it's heartbreaking, but I go back to that scripture, cry with those who cry, weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice.

Darby Strickland:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:





And it's like, Lord, help us to be better and tender towards those who are wounded. On that note, how do we develop a more tender and compassionate heart to those who have faced trauma?

Darby Strickland:

I think it's two things. I think the first is, you know, we just have to have a different stance.

You know, Jesus comes alongside broken people, and he asks some wonderful questions. He doesn't lecture the weak. Jesus handles Mary and Martha very differently at Lazarus's death. Martha approaches him with an affirmation of his power and her faith, you know, and he speaks comforting truth to her.

But when he turns and sees Mary, she's fallen at his feet and she's distraught at Lazarus's death. And he's different. He simply asks her, where have you laid him? And he too wept, you know. So, he comes close to the hurting, he allows their pain to impact him, and he connects with it, and he is gentle.

The second thing is just to listen in a way that we are affected by a person's story. And entering is, is a cost to ourselves. And Jesus modeled that for us. He came to us at a great cost for himself, but it's taking the time to know someone, allowing them to lament, sitting with that pain. We wanna rush through it to that happy ending.

Crystal Keating:

Totally.

Darby Strickland:

Yeah, and it's uncomfortable. We want to solve it and we want to fix it. And I would say it is good to be uncomfortable. It is good to know that we are powerless. It's a good thing to acknowledge that we need Jesus. And it's okay to be broken, weak, and needy.

It's good to need a Savior, but it's hard. So, when you walk alongside victims, you're gonna feel a bit of what they feel. And it is difficult, but it's so important for them to feel known.

Crystal Keating:

Hmm. I need to hear that. You know, you share about the power and comfort that comes when talking about who God is to those who are grieving, to those who are wounded, and less of an emphasis on what the person should do, even if it's biblical. And that's a tightrope for most of us to walk. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Darby Strickland:

Yeah. I just think it's that the most powerful life-changing truths are actually wrapped up in who Jesus is.

Crystal Keating:



Amen.

Darby Strickland:

But, but we often, I mean, I do this in my parenting, right? We often shift our counsel to what a person should be doing.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely.

Darby Strickland:

Don't be anxious, pray more. Yeah, it's, it's like it's solution-based. Trust God more. But those things really are not obtainable until a person knows God better. We can't trust God more because we muster up the strength to do it, right? We do it because we learn and know that he is trustworthy. So, it's learning more about who he is.

Again, why would someone pray if they felt that God was not hearing them? So, trauma changes the way that people tend to think about the world, other people, and God. And so, it's important to like gently and carefully, and tenderly help people see God accurately and his heart for them. And so, we're always inviting people to see Jesus's person and care for them. And I think that's what's gonna actually heal and impact their hearts the most.

Crystal Keating:

I couldn't agree more. As an early counseling student many, many years ago, I remember learning about the character of God and that radically changed my Christian life. I thought, you know, in my counseling, I really want the character of God to be the basis upon which every conversation is laid. Because for me, knowing God is what allows me to trust him, like you said. People would say, trust God more, and it's like, well, I don't know how to do that. I don't know who he is. And I think that's one thing you really bring us back to. Talk about all the ways that God is trustworthy. Talk about all the ways that he's faithful. Talk about the way that he's the provider.

He's the healer of our hearts. So, I thank you for that. I think that's so important; you know. In this last question, I wanna go back to the church and it's something that I think you're really rallying for, is helping the church better welcome and embrace people who have suffered trauma and abuse.

And I'm just blown away. Just last night we received a message from a woman dealing with complex PTSD. And on occasion, she'll suffer flashbacks and depression and she's seen some great gains going to a Christian counselor. And so, she really wanted to get back into serving the church as she's available. You know, she presented, hey, I'd like to be part of the prayer team or serve by helping with coffee and the leadership just felt like she needed to show an extended period of consistency and stability.

Darby Strickland:

Wow.



Crystal Keating:

And that really crushed her 'cause she recognizes, you know what, I may encounter a trigger that sparks a flashback or depression, and she's really wrestling with that. Can you kind of speak into that?

Darby Strickland:

And again, I think it's just she needs someone to be willing to see her person and her story and be okay with her brokenness. You know, it's okay if when she's serving coffee, she has a trigger and she has to excuse herself, or they may utilize her somewhere and, and maybe it's good for her to have a buddy that could step in at the last minute and, you know, just to recognize that healing is a journey. And that's true for all of us. And none of us until heaven will be fully restored. And to tell people they have to wait until they meet a certain threshold to serve fellow brothers and sisters is quite tragic. That's just, I mean, that's a way that she's choosing to worship and use the gifts that God has given her.

And to be limited by that because she's wounded is just saddens me. But I think again, it's just we really need to be willing to enter into other people's lives and live with the hard. And she's a perfect example. You know, there's so much probably to learn from her and her story. I know that I have learned so much from traumatized people about God and about how God calls me to be. And oftentimes we see people as projects or people who need to be fixed. Really, it's like seeing wounded people as people we should learn from. You know, her suffering and her questions will really propel us deeper into scripture. And if her community allowed her suffering to impact them, they would become more like Jesus as they cared better for her.

And so, God uses the wounded in so many beautiful ways to make his people more humble and gentle, and Christ-like. So, I don't think we should fear someone's grief and loss or traumatic stress, or their tears. We actually need to help them express it and come alongside them. And it's just gonna take lots and lots of time. I think it's just so important to go on that long walk and to be better stewards of her capacity, versus limiting what the Lord has placed on our heart to do.

Crystal Keating:

Well, thank you for sharing that. Darby, thank you so much for your precious time. I just love all that you're doing with CCEF and the ways that you're impacting and helping pastors and ministries come alongside people who have suffered trauma and abuse to really share the love of Jesus Christ. So, I appreciate you, Darby. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast today.

Darby Strickland:

Thank you so much. I appreciate your ministry as well. It is a huge need, but it's so special that you keep Christ before the weak and the hurting, and I so appreciate that.

Crystal Keating:

What an eye-opening conversation about the hidden disability of trauma. To come alongside someone who is wounded, we must be willing to learn their story, enter into their place of pain and suffering, and help them get to know the character of God. Jesus knows what it's like to suffer. He has compassion and he cares.

If you would like to learn more about ministering to someone in the context of abuse or navigating your church's response, care, and protection in cases of trauma, please visit [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast) to access a free web-based training called *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for The Abused*.

This training was developed by Darby Strickland, along with other experts, and is available at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast).

Thank you for listening today. Be sure to subscribe so you can join me again as I talk more with Darby next week on the topic of spiritual abuse. I am Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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