

FOREWORD

Over the past three decades, I have trained more than 4 million people, sharing with them many intimate details about my life. However, I have never shared the fact that I was a child of domestic violence. And, if I had not met Brian Martin, I don't know if I would have.

Brian asked to meet with me several years ago. I wanted to make time as I am always intrigued by what's behind the success of self-made individuals, and Brian's business was making waves in his industry. But on the day we had scheduled, I found myself running between meetings on a short stopover in New York before flying to London, and there was simply no time. Or at least that's what I thought until my assistant called to tell me that Brian had been waiting patiently in the downstairs lobby of my hotel for the past two hours. Someone that persistent I had to meet.

As it happened, I had about an hour before the car came to take my wife, Sage, and me to the airport, so I invited Brian to come up to our suite. Immediately, it felt like we were on the same wavelength, members of the same tribe—and we had more in

common than we knew. We talked for a while about his company and ways that he could help me reach my goals.

As I was getting ready to leave, Brian told me about the work he was doing through his foundation CDVA—Childhood Domestic Violence Association. He pulled out a report by UNICEF, and the numbers were staggering: 1 billion people worldwide are alive today who grew up living with domestic violence. I had no idea what a global epidemic this was. It resonated with me in ways I couldn't share with him yet. Sage and I were both in tears. Until then I had never told anyone outside of my immediate family that I had been one of those kids. It was a fact I would not publicly share until my interview with Oprah in February 2012.

I didn't like to talk about it much because my childhood does not define me, but I certainly grew up living with domestic violence. Like hundreds of millions of people, Brian and I grew up in households where violence was an ongoing part of our existence. We didn't call it violence then, we just called it life. Shouting voices from down the stairs, people smashing things on the wall, a fist through a door, those who you love most hurting one another, physically and emotionally.

I was on my own by the time I was seventeen. I used to live in anger and used my rage as energy. I converted it into drive, fortunately, because just being angry wouldn't have changed anything. Instead, those childhood experiences gave me the hunger to provide for my own wife and children, and the desire to help millions who've faced a similar situation. Feeling powerless inspired me to dedicate my life and career to empowering others.

That was also Brian's path, and the choice that countless others have made to reach their full potential despite their early experiences living with domestic violence. His story, and the many other stories you will read in this book, demonstrate that you don't need

to start out in life with all the advantages. The difference between those who are successful and those who are not is psychological strength, emotional fitness. It's the capacity to face the worst setbacks and find something inside to push through and triumph no matter the circumstance.

In the following pages, Brian answers the question, *Can a childhood filled with violence and pain be transformed into one filled with strength, love, and freedom?* The simple answer is: *Yes, it can!* You have the power to shape the raw material of your past and mold it into the life that you want.

In fact, what appeals to me most about Brian's approach is that it is based on empowerment. Our experiences as children living with domestic violence have given us the equipment—a secret weapon if you will—to overcome all kinds of obstacles in our lives. What we went through, those things we faced *as children* have left us with vast inner reserves of strength, compassion, and courage. These are the gifts we were given in exchange for the price we paid as children. It means that we are *not* victims, we are victorious.

Like I have often said, your biography is not your destiny. We are not fated to repeat what happened to us ten, twenty, thirty years ago. At any moment in our lives we can choose which course we want to take. There's no reason to be stuck in the same story. It's just a question of figuring out how to flip the script.

But first, let's look at the facts. Let's see it as it is because this is not about positive thinking, this is about the truth.

Globally, UNICEF calls childhood domestic violence one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world today, affecting a billion people worldwide.

What triggers this violence? Essentially, it arises when someone feels they have lost control: whether as a result of financial stress or the ending of a relationship or a threat to their well-being. Suddenly

they snap. Why? Often those who commit violence—physical or verbal—are emotionally scarred from feeling helpless as children, and they have been filled with fear and rage. It does not often take a lot for a person in this state to be triggered. Perhaps her life doesn't match how she thinks it should be. Maybe she has a deep-seated fear that she is not good enough. And in that moment she loses control and starts to become violent toward her partner or children. This person (or perhaps you if you have been in this position) is in crisis and is now creating a greater crisis for those she loves.

Whether you have experienced abuse or you've been an abuser, it is important to understand that your actions and thoughts are often driven by falsehoods that you've learned—or often your parents learned. And that these falsehoods can be unlearned. You can create new truths. See it as it is; not worse than it is. The deeper truth is that no matter where you are in life, you have not yet tapped into your full potential. But it is within your grasp.

Like millions of others, we first experienced this pain as children, forming the memories and associations that shaped our lives. But then we realized that we could choose to tell ourselves a different story. We, along with millions of others, including presidents, senators, Academy Award-winning actors, Grammy Award-winning entertainers, business leaders, inventors, artists, and billionaires, also happened upon some important truths, and that has made all the difference in our lives. These truths, when shared, unlock an avalanche of untapped potential. Out of so much pain and injustice, something good must come, and it does.

If you've experienced any part of what I have described here, you know that one of the most agonizing feelings in the world is to have the people you love most in the world—the people who are supposed to love you the most—put you in a position to be

hurt. For some, feeling you can do nothing to stop the abuse of others is equally excruciating.

When you grow up living with domestic violence, witnessing those you love tear each other down with physical and verbal blows, your brain doesn't know how to deal with that. This kind of pain is not like a cut or a punch. It wounds the mind, the psyche, the spirit. It is one thing to have physical pain that can heal, but spiritual pain lives deep inside your subconscious mind and defines your self-concept; it leaves an indelible mark. But one thing is true: Only those who have experienced extreme pain have extreme strength. Spiritual pain creates spiritual depth and strength.

Most of us are looking for something outside ourselves to blame for our situation rather than finding a way to take control of ourselves and maximize our greatest strengths. Giving up self-control leads to depression, anger, resentment, and all the other lies that Brian talks about throughout this book. But the fact is, we have a choice.

The history of humankind has been shaped by men and women who made it through enormous pain; men and women who, no matter what they experienced, would not give up. They found the courage to move forward. And the truth is, the same energy is in your spirit as well. Courage doesn't mean you *aren't* afraid, it means you are afraid but you do what is necessary anyway.

If you grew up living with domestic violence—or care for someone who has—remember that there are choices. There are countless people who have been able to reclaim their past and rebuild it into something that serves the greater good for the future.

The potential's inside of you now, so embrace the gift. It's time to share the truth, to speak the truth, to live the truth.

The courageous men and women you'll meet in this book have felt that pain. Some of us felt our mother's and father's pain as though it were our own. Others were once caught in this cycle, yet have successfully broken free. They have learned a way of life that's based on contribution, inner strength, and love. This path is available to you, and your road map is here.

—TONY ROBBINS



PREFACE

Brian Martin contacted me several years ago seeking my professional advice. He said he was committed to helping children living in partner-abusive families, and he wanted to be sure that his charitable foundation's programs reflected the best that science had to offer on the subject. I am often asked to consult on program development, but until that point I had never met an individual so passionate and so fiercely committed to making a difference in the lives of those who grew up living with domestic violence. Since then, I have watched and occasionally assisted as Brian has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the fact that abuse of a parent is devastating for a child to witness and that the suffering of those who have grown up in these homes is widely overlooked.

Brian has convened scholars and authorities in the areas of domestic violence, mental health, and leadership to glean their wisdom; produced an award-winning documentary about the issue, and developed a campaign and online educational program to raise awareness and offer help for those affected by what is now known as childhood domestic violence. The Change a Life program developed by his foundation, available at cdv.org, is the first

of its kind, designed to provide information and support for those who have grown up in—or who want to help someone growing up in—a partner-abusive home. I am happy to have played a role in the development and evaluation of the program and even more happy to call Brian a colleague and friend.

Brian contacted me because I have spent my academic career documenting and understanding the short- and long-term effects of domestic violence on children. Most programs designed to help children living in violent families naturally involve providing services directly to the child and/or the family itself. Yet there has been scant support and information to help the adults who were once those children.

This book, then, brings a fresh approach, using the knowledge gathered from decades of research to outline how those who were once children in partner-abusive families can reclaim their lives and futures. The science that informs this book, and the real-life experiences of men and women who have overcome the devastation of witnessing the abuse of a parent, together offer hope as well as object lessons for those trying to find their way forward.

There can be no doubt that early life in such an environment can shape how you think, feel, and act, especially in personal relationships and social interactions, and that these effects can be long lived. We've come a long way in learning how to help the children, but what about those who've already grown up and left their childhood homes? Many were raised at a time when it wasn't even acknowledged that witnessing violence could be damaging to a child. They have been left to struggle on their own, often too ashamed to share what happened with others. Because this issue has been under the radar for so long, they often don't connect the dots between what they learned in the homes they grew up in and the issues they face today. Some will insist that they are fine,

even when the facts of their lives, such as depression, anxiety or fear, and abuse or failure in their own personal relationships offer evidence to the contrary.

Most are able to get away from the violence, yet they still may be unable to live the life they hoped to lead because their perceptions of themselves and the ways they relate to others are not as they would wish them to be, and they are unaware of that fact. The effects may not be so bad that their lives have been destroyed, but bad enough that the sustained satisfaction in relationships that others seem so easily to attain predictably escapes them. Their journey remains troubled.

This book distills the body of knowledge we now have on this subject and offers a hand to those who want to change their journey. Brian has crystallized on these pages all that those of us have learned and discussed with one another and shared with him. Whether you have been severely or only mildly affected by exposure to violence as a child, or just want to learn what it is like for others who have experienced it, these chapters will offer new ways to understand those experiences and a new perspective from which to view yourself and your relationships. Even a small change in perspective can transform a life.

Reading a book is seldom the total solution to a problem. But not everyone wants or has access to professional services or a trusted friend, and many are simply not ready to talk. For those who'd rather read quietly in a room and reflect, or at least start there, this is a gift. I could not be more proud to have been a part of opening our collective eyes to the magnitude of this problem and providing comfort and support to those in need.

—RENEE McDONALD, PHD
Associate Dean
Southern Methodist University

UNDISCOVERED GIFTS

*I came to accept the secrets of our house as normal. . . .
I never talked to anyone about them.*

—Bill Clinton, *My Life*

When I was six years old, my mother slept with a knife under her pillow, and I kept a baseball bat under my bed. It was one of those souvenir bats you might win at an amusement park, but it was the best weapon I could get my hands on. Although we kept these items hidden from one another and had no idea until thirty years later, they represented an unspoken bond we shared as mother and son—each of us determined to survive my mother's boyfriend.

Keith was a big guy who played football in college but was now a bartender. He came over to our apartment in the suburbs outside of Newark, New Jersey, four or five nights a week. I never knew when he would be there. I could never sleep on those nights, so I would sneak out of my room and listen to my mom and Keith from the top of the stairs as they argued in the kitchen. I felt so small and helpless to stop them. As they started yelling at each other, my heart would beat faster and faster. The fear and the rising

tension almost felt worse than an actual blow—until my mother would scream. Most nights I would come down the stairs to try to stop it; sometimes I would stand at the stop of the stairs frozen in fear. I wasn't often the target of the violence, although at times I would get wrapped up in the confrontation. Occasionally, one of them would snap and take it out on me physically. This went on from the age of five until my late teens, when I finally moved out.

Those nights were a real-life nightmare. They changed my childhood forever and altered the person I grew up to become. They also changed who my mother was to become, and who Keith was to become. But not in the way you may think.

You see, my mother and Keith both grew up living with domestic violence. And so did *their* parents. They all grew up the same way I did. This was something I did not understand at the time; something I learned only a short time ago after finally speaking with my mother in preparation for this book.

YOU ARE MORE THAN YOU KNOW

My story is not unique. In the United States alone, more than 10 million children are living with domestic violence—just as I did, just as my mother did, just as Keith did. More than 1 in 7 adults in the United States, or 40 million people, lived with domestic violence as children. Worldwide, the number of people who lived with domestic violence when they were young is approximately 725 million. Another 275 million children are currently living with it. UNICEF calls it “one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world.”¹

Perhaps you were one of them. Or perhaps you love someone

who grew up in a home like mine, or you know of a child in need of help. Or perhaps you are just a caring soul. Whatever prompted you to pick up this book, I am grateful that we are here together.

The simple but powerful message that I hope to share in these pages is this: If you lived with domestic violence when you were young, you no longer have to live with the *effects* today. As Alison Gopnik, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, says, “We are capable of change, but our childhood is part of who we are as an adult.”² We will address what happened when you were young, but know this: Having grown up in that house, there are certain lies you learned in childhood about who you believe you are, and they may be holding you back from reaching your full potential and experiencing the happiness that was meant for you.

A friend of mine made me aware of the work of Dr. John Schindler, who defines happiness as “having pleasant thoughts most of the time.” I love that definition because I can understand it. According to this description, I was not happy. I am now.

How about you? Are your thoughts pleasant most of the time? Or are you like I was, feeling more bad than good each day, but not knowing why? The awareness you’ll gain from this book can take you from that place of feeling guilty to free, resentful to compassionate, sad to grateful, alone to trusting, angry to passionate, hopeless to guided, worthless to accomplished, fearful to confident, self-conscious to attractive, and unloved to loved.

For every lie I once believed, there is a transformative truth. And buried beneath all our childhood pain is a whole arsenal of hidden strengths—special gifts. That is our true unexpected inheritance. Because we survived difficulties that others never had to face, we have far more potential than we realize. We were forced

to develop qualities of resilience, courage, and perseverance that are now readily available to us as adults. They are just below the surface, ready to be used to achieve whatever outcome we wish. These are the hidden gifts from our past that make us something more than strong. After what we've been through as children, there isn't much that can happen to us now that we're adults that can defeat us. We haven't killed ourselves; we're not in jail. We are still standing. Our lives have been so fire tested that, in many ways, we've become invincible.

I've taken this journey, and this is why I am excited for you. I believe that what lies ahead will help you discover your true self. As I have found, most people who grew up living with domestic violence are not who they think they are—they are much more. Think of this book as a simple guide that will lead you along the path to help you understand what you experienced, how it changed you, and how you can reach the potential that was meant for you.

But first things first—as Professor Kelly McGonigal says, “To build self-control you must first have self-awareness.”³

WERE YOU A CHILD OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Who qualifies as a member of this silent group whose numbers are enough to populate an entire continent? Did your parents or those who cared for you hurt one another, verbally or physically? You were there, you saw it, heard it, you felt it. Even if they weren't physically hurting you, it felt just the same. Research is clear on this point. For a child, witnessing domestic violence is as psychologically damaging as being physically abused.

Did your parents scream at each other? To a child, that scream-

ing can feel as painful and fearful as any physical blow. I recently met Crystal, a bright, beautiful young woman one year away from graduating from a well-known university. She'd grown up in a household where they used words and tone as weapons. Still today, she is fearful. She lacks confidence and feels that she is ultimately not good enough to become anything after she graduates. In an interview, I asked her: "When you were a child, how did you feel when your parents were screaming? How did you feel when you were anticipating that something bad may happen?" She replied, "I was fearful; I wasn't courageous enough to stop it. If I was good enough, I would have been able to."

Today, Crystal feels the same way she felt when she was a child in that house. She bases her experience as an adult on what she believes was true from the past. This is what we do. But of course, her self-image is based on these lies, so she needed to hear the truth. As children of domestic violence, why is it that we would allow the opinion of our parents to control our thoughts, feelings, and actions? When you look at it that way, isn't it silly to be so affected by the words and actions of people whose judgment you know to be questionable? Awareness of these simple facts is the first step to creating change. Crystal began to feel differently when she took control of her thoughts.

Did those who were supposed to care for you insult and demean you? As a child, there is no opinion as important as our parents'. What they say, we believe. Many adults who experienced physical violence in childhood will say that it wasn't the pain of the hand; it was the pain of the words that they remember most.

Or maybe you were part of the physical violence as well. About half of all children of domestic violence have been physically abused themselves. For many, it was not the pain of the physical abuse, but the pain associated with the feeling that they weren't

able to stop it; that there was something wrong with them; that they weren't good enough. Personally, I would rather have taken open-handed blows to my face than have to watch the two adults in my home hurt each other and be powerless to stop it.

Whether it happened rarely or often, because it occurred in childhood, when our brains were developing, the impact can be dramatic and long lasting. In *The Boy Who Was Raised As a Dog*, Bruce Perry explains that even a “very brief stressful experience, at a key time in the development of the brain, resulted in alterations in stress hormone systems that lasted into adulthood. These early childhood experiences will have a far greater impact than later ones.”⁴

WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

Living with domestic violence is physically and emotionally devastating, and the pain often stays with a child long into adulthood and often with dire consequences. These silent witnesses are, according to the UNICEF report “Behind Closed Doors,” the “forgotten victims of violence in the home.”⁵ If providing everyone an opportunity to reach their full potential is a common goal, then we must focus on this issue. If ending domestic violence is a common goal, then focusing on one's experience in childhood is critical. Not least because, according to UNICEF, the single best predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence later in life is whether they grow up in a home where there is domestic violence.

These same children will grow into adults who display higher levels of depression, trauma-related symptoms, and lower self-esteem.⁶ A sizable body of research has conclusively proven that

childhood domestic violence—either observing or experiencing chronic, uncontrollable violence in the home as a child—causes cognitive and emotional damage that goes much deeper and lasts much longer than we ever previously suspected.

The chronic exposure to the stress of living in a violent home changes the neural architecture of a child's developing brain.⁷ It significantly impairs regions that are essential for learning, memory, and the regulation of emotions. It actually lowers IQ and slows development.⁸ In fact, prolonged exposure to domestic violence is no different from what soldiers experience in military combat, but because it's happening to a child whose brain is still developing, the results are often more traumatic and lasting. A 2011 senate hearing on the subject found that childhood exposure to domestic violence actually "changes who they are." As David Sousa, author of *How the Brain Learns*, told me, "It's virtually impossible for these children to realize their full potential as adults, unless they unlearn what was learned."

In December 2012, the Department of Justice released its "Report of the Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence," a groundbreaking study that has gone further than any other government agency to acknowledge the scale and long-reaching effects of living with domestic violence. The report calls this "one of the most significant challenges to the future of America's children we have ever known" and reaffirms what the research has been saying. "Living with domestic violence burdens children with a sense of loss and profound guilt and shame because of their mistaken assumption that they should have intervened to prevent the violence or tragically because they caused it."⁹

By now you may be wondering, "I am an adult now, not a child; I am in control of my thoughts, so shouldn't I be able to get over it?" According to Sousa, a part of the brain called the cognitive

belief system controls what information we notice and what we let in.

“One of our weaknesses as a species is that we start establishing our beliefs as children before we can choose them as an adult,” he explained to me in an interview. “They are often imposed on us by our environment early in childhood. Once we establish that belief system it serves as a filter. Your cognitive belief system, or your self-concept, tends to accept that information, which reinforces your beliefs and filters out information that doesn’t.”

So if early on in life you believed you were guilty, fearful, not good enough or unloved, then throughout life your brain tends to find examples to confirm that belief. *Why isn't he calling me back? Obviously it's because I am not good enough and unlovable. So here's another example to confirm what I already believe about myself.* This is how the brain works. We find more reasons to believe the lie. Do so often enough and it becomes the truth. You can't see it any differently.

WHY DOES NO ONE TALK ABOUT IT?

It's encouraging that governments worldwide are recognizing the alarming scale of the problem. Yet, shockingly, it remains almost entirely off the radar of our social consciousness.

So why has this epidemic been so widely overlooked from a public awareness standpoint? Domestic violence has very high awareness, but the impact of growing up living with domestic violence has very low awareness. Compare the awareness level to bullying, for example. No comparison. Why? There has been a general reluctance to talk about something that has been so stig-

matized. And much of the focus of research and discussion has been on women in situations of domestic violence even though, as leading researcher Renee McDonald pointed out recently in an interview, “There are many more children in battered women’s shelters than women.”

Well, first and foremost, they don’t know what to call it. People who grew up living with domestic violence struggle to define what the experience was. It wasn’t domestic violence because that refers to adults; it wasn’t child abuse in their eyes as that most often refers to physical abuse. Neither neglect nor emotional abuse adequately describe it. Many researchers will call it child witness to intimate partner violence. Have you ever heard of that? Less than 1 percent of the population has, according to a recent study. And further, this word “witness” doesn’t work because it is a passive word and doesn’t adequately describe the impact.

Children don’t talk about it. They are afraid that if they say something outside the house, they may get into trouble. Or maybe they are afraid that one of their parents will get locked up, or they’ll be taken away into foster care. Or maybe they will put one of their parents in greater peril.

One morning when I was in second grade, I woke up to screaming downstairs. I ran down and grabbed my mother by the hand and we sprinted out of the house in our pajamas. We kept running until we got to the police station. Later that day, Keith was escorted to a chair across from me in handcuffs. I don’t know why this happened, but I do recall vividly what happened next. He leaned close to me and whispered, “Now I am *really* gonna hurt her.” It is difficult for me to explain the pain those words caused in my little eight-year-old body, the degree of fear and guilt and worthlessness and hopelessness I felt. I caused it. And again, I would be unable to stop it.

Adults who are engaging in the violence don’t talk about it for

obvious reasons. Bystanders who are aware it is happening don't talk about it because it is *none of their business*. Besides the general silence, there's also a scarcity of resources available for children who are living with domestic violence currently or for the adults who did.

Fear and uncertainty also prevent them from doing the one thing that all research points to as the key step toward reaching their full potential—sharing what happened with another. Communicating our experiences helps us better understand what actually happened and its true significance, enabling us to gain an independent perspective from others. If there is no awareness and no sharing, how can we truly understand what we experienced?

As Dr. Norman Doidge, a renowned psychoanalyst explains, once we can understand and recognize the memory, we can file it as a past event and therefore rewire the brain to not pull it back up at any given point.¹⁰

For the billion people globally who lived with domestic violence in childhood and for the millions of children experiencing it now, this lack of awareness maintains the shame and isolation, prevents many from finding the help they need, and perpetuates the cycle of violence. Studies have shown, for example, that simply knowing the traumatic effects of violence on children creates a strong motivation for abusive parents to stop.¹¹

Many parents and other caregivers in these situations simply have no idea of the far-reaching impact of their action, or inaction. Even the language used in all the research on this topic manages to lessen the public's already limited awareness. The studies and surveys use terms like *witness*, to describe those who've spent their early life living in these homes. What a weak word! It suggests that this is something we should be able to get over, as if we were just passing through. We know what this witnessing feels

like, and it's far more than just being a spectator. It's that kind of bad branding—choosing words that not only don't resonate but minimize the true impact—that keeps this issue deep in the shadows.

This has resulted in a challenge that we all must face—how do we help a population that has fallen through the cracks: children who, as adults, are six times more likely to commit suicide, fifty times more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and seventy-nine times more likely to commit a violent act against another.¹² These are bright, creative, intelligent souls who grow to be adults who unfortunately never got to know their true selves, who feel more bad than good each day, but don't know why.

CLOSE TO BECOMING A STATISTIC

I could have easily become one of those statistics. Although I am the first in four generations in my family not to go to prison, I came close to repeating that pattern on any number of occasions and only now do I believe I am, each day, making progress toward reaching my full potential.

When I was seventeen I bought my mother a new car, with money I'd been making hustling jewelry. I'd just moved out of the house, and buying the car was my way of taking care of her. But I had a condition: I didn't want to ever see Keith there again, and she agreed. A couple of days later I spotted his car in front of the house. I pulled my car into the parking lot of an office building next to the house, turned off the engine, and then reached down under my car seat and pulled down the makeshift hiding compartment I'd created for my gun.

I held the gun in my hand and opened the car door with every intention of putting a few bullets in Keith. But as my foot touched

the pavement I froze. I couldn't do it. Yet again I didn't have the courage to do what I tried to do dozens of times before. For no other reason than I didn't want to go to jail, and I knew I would get caught.

Furious with myself, I hit my head against the steering wheel again and again. What kind of man was I? I put the gun under my own chin. But then I found myself too afraid to pull the trigger. I was even a failure at trying to kill myself.

SOME DEFY THE ODDS

Anyone who has ever lived with domestic violence when they were young can relate in some way to my level of desperation. Two-thirds of all the young people in the United States who commit murder kill the person who is hurting their parent. That is a remarkable statistic. And even more remarkable when you think of all of those like me who never actually went through with it, but thought about it constantly. Even those who do not repeat the cycles of violence, incarceration, or substance abuse must often struggle with significant and ongoing emotional challenges, feeling more bad than good each day. This is not how it was supposed to be. Their lives are hidden tragedies of what could have been. Their relationships are not what they expected them to be. They feel that they are not good enough, knowing that they haven't reached their true potential in life.

Yet some come back stronger than ever. "More than any other creature, human beings are able to change," says Gopnik.¹³ Their resilience and strength comes from having endured a childhood that others cannot even comprehend. Rather than fall into the cycle of violence, they reverse a childhood of pain and suffering

to thrive, overcoming their difficulties, developing their talents, founding businesses, building communities, and creating lives for themselves that exceed their own hopes and dreams. For them, their childhood becomes the reason why they uniquely can.

Post-traumatic stress has become a familiar term, but the notion of post traumatic *growth* is not so common. It can, in fact, according to Stephen Joseph, be the engine of transformation. His research shows that this situation really can have a silver lining. “Adversity, like the grit that creates the oyster, is often what propels people to become more true to themselves, take on new challenges, and view life from a wider perspective,” he says.¹⁴ In other words, those who suffer the most change the world.

Some of the most accomplished people grew up living with domestic violence. As a child, Halle Berry watched her mother being brutally beaten by her father. Yet she was able to achieve a level of success in a field that is among the most competitive. It’s hard to imagine such a beautiful woman grappling with low self-esteem, but she admits she’s had to battle a sense of being unworthy since childhood.

“Violence was an ongoing part of my life,” Anthony Robbins, the world-renowned life coach, remembers in a recent interview with Oprah Winfrey. “Something I couldn’t escape. People smashing things on the wall, slamming the doors, putting their fists through things, being called a liar or having your head beaten up against the wall were all things happening in my house.”¹⁵

Bill Clinton was terrified as a four-year-old, traumatized by violence in his home. But somehow he found a way to turn that fear into confidence—enough confidence to lead a nation.

The list goes on: Oprah Winfrey, Senator Scott Brown, Joe Torre, Patrick Stewart, Christina Aguilera, Drew Barrymore, Tina Turner, and countless others.

How did each of them find a path to resilience? How did they overcome their conditions and go on to accomplish great things in key areas of their lives? I became obsessed with finding the answers to these questions and, as I pursued them, other questions arose. What happens to people who grow up in homes like mine? They felt a pain that is unique to those who have seen the people they love most in life hurt each other again and again. At the most vulnerable point in their lives, they've experienced the emotional hurt of being powerless to stop it and having to anticipate it happening again and again. So, under those conditions, what makes them do what they do? How can they reach their full potential? The answers are simpler and more accessible than you might think.

ONE KEY TRUTH YOU MUST KNOW

As a child of domestic violence, you have inner reserves of strength far beyond the ordinary, and the ability to channel all that you have been through and felt into a life of extraordinary fulfillment and success. These truths are already inside of you, but you weren't born with them, you *earned* them by living through what you lived through and coming out of it to be here today. Again, it is what makes you invincible. As world-renowned psychotherapist Cloé Madanes told me, "People who experience an injustice in childhood, one brought on by their parents, feel a spiritual pain that shapes the unconscious. Because of what they experienced, they are able to reach a plane that few humans can, a level of understanding, resilience, and compassion that resides deep inside them." They felt a pain that is unique only to those who, at the most vulnerable moment in the life of a human being, know what it feels like to see those you love most in life hurt again and again

and be powerless to stop it. All the while knowing it will happen again.

Wherever you are in your life now, it's possible to build on that resilience. You are precisely where you were meant to be. You have that power. Perhaps you endured suffering so others won't have to. So your children don't have to. Remember, "Resilient children are made, not born."¹⁶ There is enough knowledge to help us make conscious decisions and unlearn patterns of thinking. These facts are "drawn from years of research and clinical practice [and show] that focusing on, understanding and deliberately taking control of what we do in our thoughts and actions can enable us to move forward in life following adversity."¹⁷

Findings reported only within the past two decades provide us with insights as to how the brain learns and have proven there are specific, concrete steps you can take to, as David Sousa puts it, "unlearn what was learned." We now know what works. The brain, Sousa says, is a pattern-making machine. Once it recognizes a pattern, a series of feelings are triggered. Most of these patterns are not identifiable or recognizable to us. They are hidden. But together we will find them and make a change.

In the same way that you do not have to be a computer scientist to work a computer, you do not need to be a therapist to know how to work your brain. As Bruce Perry points out, "Therapeutic experiences do not take place in therapy, but in naturally occurring healthy relationships."¹⁸

All of the evidence points to one clear fact: The pathway from living with domestic violence during early life to becoming resilient is shown through a caring, thoughtful adult who helped you unlearn what was learned, who showed you why you weren't guilty or worthless, and who let you see how you could become truly free and accomplished. I like to call that person the *One*.

Who was that One for you? Did you ever find her? Did he ever find you? Whether the answer is yes or no, the fact that you are reading this now, at this moment, answers the question for today. And today is what counts. Allow this book to be the One for you.

WHERE DO THESE ANSWERS COME FROM?

I wasn't aware of it at the time, but as I look back I realize my entire adult life has been about trying to answer the question, What happens to people who grow up living with domestic violence? I may not have been asking the right questions most of the time, but I was always seeking the answers. You probably have been doing the same.

It all started a little before the gun incident, when I was still living with my mother. She worked as a waitress, late into the night, and usually had a couple of cocktails to unwind after her shift. That's when she would open up to me with advice about how to be a better man or with admonitions like, "You're a selfish little prick, you know that?" which, at times, I certainly was. On other nights, it was, "My precious baby boy, my son, my son, my only son, I love you so much." I do not blame her for this, how could I blame her for what she did not know? How could I blame her for doing what she learned? She did remarkably well considering the childhood she had—a childhood very similar to mine.

On one of her two a.m. visits to my room she gave me a couple of books and said that she heard of them through the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. The one that struck me most was *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychologist who survived a concentration camp during World War II and went on to establish a movement based on the premise that we can find

and control the meaning in all forms of existence, even a concentration camp.

My takeaway was this: If Viktor Frankl could go through what he went through and control the meaning of what he experienced how could I not? He experienced more pain than I could ever imagine, and came through it to lead a productive and successful life and gave well beyond himself. He realized that he could not act or feel in a way that was different from whom he thought he was. So he controlled the meaning. One day I would be in control. I would have the knowledge. I wouldn't have to convince anyone of it because I would know it to be true. The rent would be paid and my mother would have a chance to live safely and comfortably, without having to work so hard or mask the pain with alcohol or cower in fear. We all have dreams and desires and we all want to experience life fully without limitations.

IF I KNOW THE ANSWERS WHY CAN'T I APPLY THEM?

With my newfound awareness, I immediately attempted to put Frankl's methods into practice. Not that I succeeded. At first, it was quite the opposite, which got me very discouraged. This was the wrong reaction yet again. One of my small slipups occurred during metal shop, my last class of the day. I wasn't particularly handy, but I liked the fact that there was a lot of free time in class for me to go through the sports pages of the *Newark Star-Ledger*. As I was poring through the pages that listed the horse races for the Meadowlands that night, taking bets from my classmates like some half-assed bookie, the shop teacher walked over to me and ripped the paper out of my hand.

“Brian, that is enough for today.”

Of course he was right. I’d been handicapping for the entire period, and I had \$50 worth of action on horses I knew couldn’t win. But I didn’t take it that way. In that moment, I believed my shop teacher was trying to make me look foolish. The rage I felt for all those times Keith belittled me or I felt belittled all on my own, rose up inside. I stood up, stared into his eyes and said, “You’re right, it is.” Then I grabbed my paper back and walked out of class.

No sooner was I down the hallway when I realized I had overreacted. I felt like a failure again; I had the information but didn’t use it. I had just reread the previous night that I must control the meaning, and here I was doing the exact opposite. What was I, stupid? What I didn’t realize at the time was that the sheer fact that I was trying was having a massively positive impact on my brain. As Doidge puts it, “Each time we try we begin fixing bad connections and creating new ones. Even just from the effort. We create new pathways in the brain, and we lay the groundwork for change. We may not be able to eliminate the feeling altogether, but we can choose not to act on it, and by making that choice, we heal.”¹⁹ Of course at the time, while hiding out in the bathroom smoking, I did not realize that and was not congratulating myself on recognizing my mistake. Instead, I was brought down to the guidance counselor’s office, where I received additional answers.

YOU CAN CONTROL YOUR THOUGHTS LIKE YOU CONTROL YOUR FINGER

I told the counselor about Frankl’s book and the disappointment I felt in myself for failing to control the meaning. She was im-

pressed. Although I'd never considered college an option, and it was late in the day to start applying, she talked with me about the possibility and what I would need to do to get there. It was the first time an adult saw the possibility in me of becoming something more—a way to become financially successful beyond the hustling that was part of my youth. Then she gave me another gift: a copy of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey.

While reading the book I came across a simple concept that I have seen hundreds of times since but, up until that time in my life, had never considered. Between a stimulus and a response there is a gap in time. What you choose to do in that gap makes all the difference. Covey had built on this idea from Viktor Frankl. I realized that a thought triggers a feeling and while I may not be able to control a given thought that strikes me, *I can choose what to do with that thought* in the same way I can control what I do with my fingers or hand or arm. “Noticing a thought is not the same as believing it,” says Kelly McGonigal.²⁰ Or, as educational psychologist Kristin Neff, puts it, “Mindfulness requires that we not ‘over identify’ with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negativity.”²¹

So I could choose to buy into the feeling and stay with it or choose to get out of it. It struck me enough to write on the cover of my school notebook, “Manage the Gap.” And as I write these words I am looking at a small plaque on my desk that has the same message. Simple statements that present you with a new possibility, with a new truth, can create immediate change. In other words, as Frankl instructs, instead of just reacting, use that moment between feeling and action to step outside of yourself and ask some basic questions (manage the gap), then choose the answer that will lead to the most positive action (control the meaning).

APPLYING THE ANSWERS LEADS TO AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

In my final year of high school I worked hard to get my grades up and got into a county college. It was there that I met Stacey, the woman who was to become my wife.

I did not believe that I was naturally smart. This is a belief that I share with other people who grew up living with domestic violence. How could I spend time thinking about school when I was busy running to the police station in my pajamas? How could *you*? Didn't you spend most of your time in school trying to figure out what your classmates and teachers were thinking about you? Perhaps worried about what the night would bring? How could we pay attention? Thus we were made to believe we weren't smart, and our brain found evidence to support it. It's another lie that we will unlearn during our time together.

But I was determined to make it. I did well enough to get accepted to graduate school and get an MBA, after which I married, started a family, and got a good job. Then I took a risk to start my own business and built a successful company that would give me, my mother, my wife, and my children the kind of financial security that I had craved when I was growing up. By the time I hit my late twenties, early thirties, my life revolved around work. I wasn't as close to my wife and children as I thought I should be, but I believed I was doing it for them. And besides, I was good at it. This was an area of my life where I had complete control. I kept on reading and learning—for the purpose of getting better at my profession, which would lead to more money, to more security, and ultimately to the power I never had when I was a child. Now *I* would be the one who was important. Or so I thought.

One day during a meeting at Nickelodeon, their executives shared a fascinating statistic: When parents were asked to name their fondest childhood memory, the vast majority said, “Memories of my time vacationing with family.” As I thought about that later that night, I asked myself, “What were *my* fondest childhood memories?” Well, most of the ones that I remembered all sucked. But why should that have to be the case for others who grew up in the same way I did? So, in 2007, I decided to create a foundation called Makers of Memories, which provided trips for children who shared my background of living with domestic violence. I saw the excitement in the eyes of my young son and daughter when I took them on trips and exposed them to new discoveries, so I thought it would help create joyful memories for kids who grew up like me.

At the end of one trip to Walt Disney World in Florida, we all watched a spectacular fireworks show called “Wishes” that ended with Jiminy Cricket singing, “When You Wish upon a Star.” At the end a star is shot over Cinderella’s Castle and you are supposed to make a wish upon it. I mentioned that to the six-year-old boy sitting next to me and then asked him, “What’s your wish?”

He looked up at me and quietly answered, “I wish they would stop hurting each other.” I put my arms around him and just sat there in silence. Of course, when I was six that would have been my answer too.

This should not be the wish of any child. But there it was—a young life filled with nightmares. If he couldn’t dream at that moment in life, when could he ever dream? He needed a dream to get through the nightmare, and I didn’t deliver.

WHAT CAN HELP THOSE WHO GREW UP LIVING WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

I was haunted by my conversation with that child. It bothered me that our foundation's mission wasn't having the kind of impact I'd hoped for. So in the days following that Disney trip I started intensively researching and came across "Behind Closed Doors," the UNICEF study on children of domestic violence I cited earlier. That night I reread the short document about thirty times. I was blown away by the size and scope of the problem and that, despite the sheer numbers—hundreds of millions—who'd lived or were still living with domestic violence, among the general population there was almost no awareness of these facts. I knew that I wanted to get word out to all these children and to adults who were once these children. I wanted them to understand that they were not alone and that they could reach their full potential in all areas—socially, professionally, financially, emotionally—in all the ways that mattered most to them.

Of course, I'm no expert. I'm just a guy who's lived through this and didn't want others to have to suffer under the same legacy. Because I'm not an expert, I reached out to those who were.

GREAT MINDS COME TOGETHER

In 2010, we hosted a summit of academics, neuroscientists, and researchers to figure out promising ways we could use their knowledge to help the billion people across the globe who grew up living with domestic violence. My original intent was to film this

gathering as part of a documentary, to raise awareness. Several ideas were discussed at the event. But a key question was: What creates resiliency? Some people who grew up living with domestic violence do better than others, and the information we shared led us to the conclusion that the most resilient among them have had an adult who stepped into their lives—a teacher, relative, or friend—who reinforced truths and helped them unlearn the lies. These findings eventually led to our foundation’s alliance with UNICEF and the world’s leading scholars to develop and implement the Change a Life program, a scalable solution that trains adults to elevate awareness and deliver key messages to those still living with domestic violence, to help change a life.

It was a productive day—many of them had never met one another.

As the session was coming to a close, I asked a few questions that had been on my mind for a long time: How do people who’ve grown up living with domestic violence feel? What do they believe about themselves? What feelings do they experience most frequently? The group put forward a number of ideas but the words most often used were *guilty*, *resentful*, *sad*, *alone*, *angry*, *hopeless*, *worthless*, *fearful*, *self-conscious*, and *unloved*. These are, in fact, the ten lies you learn growing up with domestic violence—lies that you can unlearn after you uncover the truths.

It was another, pivotal moment; a major breakthrough. That night I didn’t sleep. I studied my notes well into the next morning. For all my studying and reading; for all my awareness of childhood domestic violence as a problem and my desire to do something about it, I had not been self-aware. But there it was with every emotion, I realized that I *believed* each of these lies about myself. Deep down, no matter what I portrayed to the outside world, I believed I was and was destined to always be guilty, resentful, sad,

alone, angry, hopeless, worthless, fearful, self-conscious, and unloved. These beliefs shaped all of my thoughts, which created my feelings, which then led me to act. Many of those actions kept me from reaching my full potential.

All those books I'd been reading for most of my adult life really weren't helping, at least not in the way they were intended. How can a self-help tactic work when deep down you believe all of these things and you feel far more bad than good each day? After all, our feelings and actions are always consistent with who we think we are. Who you believe you are, you are. That is your self-concept and you cannot put a self-help tactic on top of it. You need to address the root of the issue first: the self-concept.

But as we have learned, we can unlearn what was learned. "The brain is plastic and is changing all the time. With focus, recognition and motivation we control how our brain functions," explains Doidge.²² You can unlearn the lies you learned in childhood and form new ways of thinking. You take a small action that builds a habit and the habit gets the result.

Yes, change can be automatic. For some it may not; but one thing that can happen immediately is awareness. More than 80 percent of change is awareness! That awareness leads to progress, and daily progress leads to living the life that was meant for you—the one that was stolen from you as a child. Changing the story of our lives can take time or it can happen in an instant, but progress is happening right now. It is all well within your grasp.

IT'S WORTH IT

One change will create momentum. You will begin finding reasons why you can, as opposed to why you can't. For many, simply

reading these words, or even just relating to the examples of others, can be the first step in a broader transformation. As you unlearn the lies that were unconsciously encoded when you were a child and free yourself from them, you can begin a journey toward reclaiming the life you were meant to live.

Any of us can change the story of our lives. We can create new memories and new emotional habits that will replace the old ones. By erasing that glitch that was corrupted by environments and behavior not of our choosing, we *can* give ourselves, and those around us, a better life.

As a child, your most fundamental need, security, was not met. You felt powerless, unimportant, and insignificant. But the fact is you are incredibly accomplished, important, and powerful. You are not broken. You endured so much *as a child*, and yet you are here. You already paid the price, and yet you are here. But it doesn't stop there. You may not be tapping into that deep well of knowledge and strength that you possess, you may not even realize it's just below the surface. There's so much more of life out there for you to live, so it's time to take it back and do what you were meant to do; be who you were meant to be. The tools in this book will provide you with the guide to get there and to build on all that you have already achieved.

LEARNING FROM THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE US

This book brings together the wisdom and experience of many people who have already spent hundreds of thousands of hours studying what happens to people who grow up living with domestic violence. I have tried to summarize some of the most effective tools and strategies to create change so you can realize what you

were meant to experience in this life—your dreams and desired outcomes (not goals, because goals are hopes and outcomes happen). So take this journey with me and receive this genuine message of possibility, delivered through the authentic voices of those who have successfully fought hard against the darkness. Their stories may not be complete. We all have more growing to do, but we are now moving toward our most important desired outcomes, as opposed to away from them and doing so happily. Our thoughts are pleasant most of the time.

Even if you didn't get those same opportunities, even if you haven't been able to change your environment or encountered someone caring and insightful enough to intervene and help you see through the lies, you have the power to take those first steps on your terms.

Anyone can create the life he or she desires. You too can join the ranks of courageous men and women who have decided to see themselves not as victims but as whom they really are—free, compassionate, grateful, trusting, passionate, guided, accomplished, confident, attractive, and loving. Your time is now. You deserve this; your loved ones deserve this. This was who you were meant to be.