

The truth about trauma and the impact of terror, and how I learned resilience

April 28, 2015 **By Leisa Irwin**

in [ACE Study](#), [Adverse childhood experiences](#), [Child trauma](#), [Resilience](#), [Trauma](#)

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Mom, Ann, Dad, Leisa, 1972

I was about seven years old when my mom first told me about the abuse she had suffered at the hand of her mom, my grandmother. I remember this vividly because I had just poured a can of grape soda over my three-year-old brother's head in a "do you dare me, yes I dare you" game I was playing with my five-year-old sister. My brother, of course, started screaming as if he was being murdered, and my gorgeous, stay-at-home mom bolted out the front door of our early 1900s home as if she was going to kill someone.

The look on her face was enough to scare all of us. Even my brother, who seconds earlier was wailing at the top of his lungs, turned his hysterics into mini whimpers. My mom, however, was just getting started. "Who did this?" she yelled.

My brother pointed at me, my sister pointed at me... and I pointed at my sister. My mom said, "All of you had better make up your minds about this because the one thing I hate more than anything is being lied to."

And so, knowing that I was in way over my head, I said to my younger brother, "You were looking the other way, you heard Ann, she was daring me to do it, and when I wouldn't she did it." My brother turned his arm and pointed at my sister. My sister shrieked, "Why are you lying? Why are you blaming me? You always blame me."

By now, several of our neighbors had stepped onto to their front steps to watch. The old lady at the house to the right was just shaking her head in disgust. It was the summer of 1976. Most of the fathers in the neighborhood worked in blue-collar jobs. Most of the neighborhood moms were home with their kids, at least in the summers. The city streets had sidewalks, and the houses were separated by narrow driveways. My mom used to tell us not to air our dirty laundry for the neighbors to see, and this was exactly what we were doing.

My mom yelled at all of us to get inside. She sent my sister and I to our room and dragged my crying brother into the kitchen so that she could wash the grape soda out of his hair and clothes. The whole time she was in the kitchen, I could hear her yelling, "Why would anyone do this? I work my ass off around here, and this is the thanks I get?"

By seven years old I was well aware of what was to come. My mom was on a rampage. She would inevitably call my dad, who worked down the street. My dad would come home and take off his belt and use it to beat our bare butts until we could not sit down. My mom would cry and threaten to leave us or kill herself. And then my mom and dad would start fighting. The fight would turn violent, my mom would start throwing dishes, my dad would hit her, shake her, yell at her, and then she would leave in the car, her last words to us something like, "I hate you all, you've destroyed my life. I never wanted children. I'm never coming back. I wish I were dead." And then she'd leave. Sometimes she'd come back in the middle of the night and we'd wake up in the morning and it was as if nothing had

happened. Sometimes she'd be gone for a few days. Either way we would never talk about it.

I always knew I was to blame. Between my younger siblings crying and my dad yelling, I was the one who was supposed to fix these things. I was the oldest. My dad would remind me all the time that I needed to take care of my mom. My sister and brother needed to be protected; they were so little, I knew that one of these days they would be dead if I didn't take care of my mom and them.

My mom was still downstairs, she wasn't yelling as she had been, but she was crying. I went downstairs to the kitchen, and owned up to my role in the soda incident. I told her I was sorry. I told her we were just playing and I had made a mistake. I begged her to stop crying and told her how much I loved her. My mom hugged me and then just as quickly as she had embraced me, she pushed me away, slapped me across the face and told me that she hated me. This cycle had already been a part of my life for so long that I no longer cried when she hit me. I just kept telling her that I was sorry, and that everything was going to be okay; that we all loved her and that I would help her.

I picked up my brother, his hair still damp and his shirt missing, and told him everything was going to be fine. He was used to the drama too. It was past his nap time, and the events of the last hour had taken their toll. I carried him upstairs and tucked him into bed. I checked on my sister; she had fallen asleep. The bedroom smelled like urine, and I knew she had wet the bed again. I grabbed some towels and clean pants and woke my sister up enough to get her into some dry clothes. She looked as if she was going to start crying again, and I told her to be quiet. I wouldn't tell mom she had wet the bed. We both knew what would happen if mom found out.

My sister had been wetting her bed ever since she had been potty trained. Sometimes she would wet her pants even when she was awake, but most of the time it happened when she was sleeping. My parents would get so angry with her. Based on their reactions, and the way they yelled at her, I believed my parents when they said that she was doing it on purpose. Sometimes in the middle of the day, my mom would find my sister hiding behind the television set that sat on the floor in the living room. She had wet her pants again and was hiding because she

did not want anyone to find out. One night when my sister was two years old, but almost three, I was awakened by my sister's screaming. We shared a room. My sister had a big mattress on the floor against one wall, and my twin bed was across from hers, on the opposite wall. Both of my parents were in our room and my mom was hitting my sister and yelling at her because she had wet the bed again while she was asleep.

My dad was yelling too, both at my mom and at my sister. I could hear the fear and the pain in my sister's screams. My mom started yelling at my dad to "get her out of here before I kill her." My dad scooped up my sister and carried her downstairs. I got out of bed to and followed them; I wasn't going to let my mom kill my sister. My mom came behind us, still yelling that she was going to kill her. Once we were on the main floor of the house, my mom yelled at me to go upstairs and get my sister's blanket. I did as I was told and ran back to our room to fetch my sister's favorite blue blanket that she carried around with her wherever she went. When I got back downstairs my mom, dad and sister were not there, but I could hear my sister crying. I followed the cries into the basement, and found my parents putting my sister into an old wood toy box that in my current frame of mind, looked like a child size coffin. My sister was beyond hysterical. My mom was telling her to shut up, and that she wasn't going to have any more peeing in the bed.

My mom saw that I was behind them, and she yanked the blanket out of my hand and put it in the box with my sister and then she closed the lid and latched it shut. I started crying and begging for them to let Ann out. My dad turned around and hit me and told me to get my ass into bed before they locked me in the basement too. I was terrified of the basement. It was dark, cold, damp, and there were spiders, centipedes, and sometimes even bats and mice. I wanted to help my sister, but I was terrified that they might lock me in the basement, too.

Later that night, after I knew that my parents were asleep, I went back to the basement, unhooked the lid to the toy box, picked up my sister, and carried her to our room. I put her into bed with me and put stuffed animals around her so that if my mom or dad came into our room when I was asleep they wouldn't see my sister. I also knew that my mom and dad would probably sleep late after the

craziness that had happened that night, so I was hoping that I would wake up first and my parents would never find out that I had rescued my sister in the middle of the night.

Ever since then, my sister was terrified every time she realized she had wet the bed. Sometimes she would wake up in the middle of night with wet clothes; she would change her pajamas, hide the wet ones under her mattress, and then go back to bed. I usually noticed the lump under her mattress and would take the smelly clothes into the bathroom and wash them out and then put them in the closet to dry before putting them in the hamper. I cleaned up the bed the best I could. I didn't dare change the bedding or my mom would freak out about the laundry. I took some baby shampoo from the bathroom and dumped some on the bed and sheets, scrubbed it down with a wet washcloth and then put a towel over it. We'd get in trouble for leaving a wet towel on the bed, but not as much as we would if my sister wet the bed.

My sister fell back to sleep, and I went back downstairs to start cleaning up the kitchen. My mom was on her hands and knees trying to get something red off the crease in the floor, where the kitchen cabinet met the old, worn-out linoleum. She was using an old toothbrush and she was crying. It took me less than a minute to realize that the red she was scrubbing off the floor was her own blood, which was running down her hand as she scrubbed.

"Mom, let me do that," I said, taking the toothbrush out of her hand. I was kneeling next to her, trying to assess the damage she had done this time. Her wrist looked bad, but she had lived through worse. I grabbed a towel that was hanging on the handle of the oven.

"Mom," I said as calmly as I could, "I think you must have cut yourself while you were cleaning. Let me help you." My mom let me wrap the towel around her wrist. I told her to put her hand above her head so that the bleeding would stop. She lifted her arm and I pushed a kitchen chair over to her so that she could place her elbow on it as she sat on the floor. I went to the freezer and grabbed some ice and put the cubes in a towel. I held it on her wrist, and told her it was going to be okay.



Grandma, Mom, her brother, Grandpa

My mom told me quietly that she didn't cut her wrist while cleaning. I told her I knew that, but it was going to be okay. She was crying again, and told me how sorry she was for hitting me. She didn't mean to do that. She told me she loved me, and she knew she was a terrible mother. And then she said, "I just never thought I'd be so much like your grandmother. I wanted to be a good mom." I told her she was a good mom. I told her that it was going to be okay because grandma was a good grandma. And that's when she said, "I'm glad she's a good grandma, but she was a terrible mom. When I was about your age," she told me, "David (her older brother) and me got into a fight. Your grandpa was out of town for work and your grandmother pulled me by my hair and dragged me down to the basement, pushed me into the closet, and locked the door. She left me there for two days. When your grandpa came home, I heard him asking for me, and I started yelling for him. He came downstairs with my mom, and opened up the closet door. I was crying so hard I couldn't talk. And then your grandmother said, "Marilynne, what are you doing in the closet? I've been worried sick about you." And then she took me upstairs, put me the tub, and said, "If you tell your father anything, I'll kill you, just like I did Linda."

Linda was my grandmother's first child. No one ever talked about what happened to her. I just knew that she died when she was very young, before my uncle David or my mom had been born. My grandmother would talk about her sometimes. She told me I was just like Linda, so smart, and beautiful. Sometimes she would call me Linda. My grandfather always stopped her.

“Margaret,” he’d say, “you stop that right now. Leisa is perfect as Leisa, and not because she is like our dead daughter.” I used to think that grandpa was being mean to my grandma when he talked like that, but when I got older I realized that my grandfather was just trying to keep my grandmother’s mind from drifting into hell.

As my mom talked, I resumed the cleaning. I told my mom I was sorry that grandma was so mean to her. Secretly I was terrified. My grandmother always seemed a bit crazy, but if my grandmother had killed Linda, then what else had she done? What else might she do? What if my mom was like my grandmother? What if she really did kill us? There were so many times I thought she might, so many times she said she was going to. How was I ever going to keep us all alive? Mom said she was feeling tired and needed to rest. I let her know that both Ann and Craig were asleep and I would finish the kitchen. Mom went to bed.

... I know that many people with a ... (a history like) ... mine will struggle with health issues, chemical dependency, and/or may have a shortened life span. It took me many, many years of counseling, which occurred long before I even knew about impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), to address my belief systems about myself. My physical health issues are in alignment with [the results of the CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE Study](#), which shows a link between childhood trauma and the adult onset of chronic disease, mental illness, violence and being a victim of violence.

Her story continues into her journey with counseling and healing. You can read more at:

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