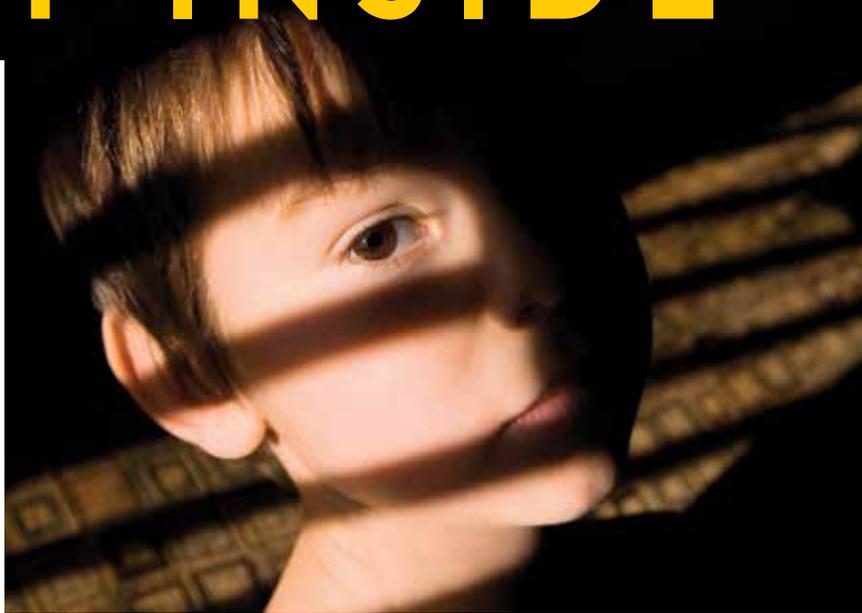


THE BOY INSIDE

BY MEGHAN ROBERTSON, RCC

Imagine someone who has spent most of his life going in and out of correctional facilities. Now, add to that picture someone who has also been entrenched in addiction for just as long. This is not typically a person many would see as having great capacity for or desire to change. Theft, robbery, breaking and entering, possession for the purposes of trafficking, assault — the charges on a criminal record can quickly become someone's whole identity. In short: a criminal, an addict.



I have been working with men connected with the criminal justice system since 2011, and I have learned that as much as they have harmed others throughout their lives, there is no shortage of trauma they have also experienced. Often they endure multiple foster homes; horrific physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; years of their own as well as family members' substance use; the violence that exists in crime and gang-life; the death of loved ones; and countless other traumatic experiences.

While it might be because I have two young sons myself, I have increasingly seen these men as little boys in the trauma work we engage in together — regardless of how big they are, how intimidating they try to be, or how many tattoos they have acquired over the years. When focused healing is directed to the little boy inside the “hardened criminal,” I tend to see

the most significant shift in how past trauma currently grips their lives. When that little boy is given the opportunity to voice his experience, the grown man starts to see himself and the world differently.

NATHAN'S STORY

Nathan* was referred to me in the hopes of processing a traumatic experience from his early childhood. When he was four years old, his mother was violently attacked by her boyfriend in front of him. Nathan remembered wanting to protect his mother and stop the attack, but he was held back by his older brother and dragged into another room where he could no longer see what was happening. He went on to spend the majority of his childhood and adolescence in foster care and began using drugs regularly when he was 12. He spent a great deal of time in a juvenile detention facility and eventually entered the adult prison system as he became more entrenched

in the lifestyle of drug use and crime. By the time I met with Nathan, he had almost lost count of the criminal charges he had racked up over the 20 years he had been in and out of correctional facilities.

Of all the violence he had been involved in over these years, he said what was causing him the most distress in his life currently was that early experience involving his mother. Nathan often had flashbacks and nightmares, and he blamed himself for not having done more to protect his mother. He described his four-year-old self with contempt, disgust, and shame that he could have been so weak to have allowed that to happen to his mother. At six feet, three inches and 250 pounds of primarily muscle, “weak” was not an adjective regularly used to describe Nathan. He described himself

**Nathan is a composite of multiple clients I have worked with over the years.*

as someone who did not deserve to be loved or happy and who would always be a “loser.”

Following the standard EMDR processing protocol,¹ we set up the target memory and began processing; however, over our next few sessions, Nathan kept cycling back to how “weak and useless” he was to not have been able to prevent or stop the attack. I asked Nathan to picture himself as he was at four years old: not as the big and strong man in the session, but as the “skinny rail of a kid” he had described himself to me as being. As I often do, I also asked him to stand up and show me with his hand how tall he was when he was four compared to his current height. When he did so and sat back down, I encouraged him, with this image in mind, to really look at this child part of himself.^{2,3}

M: *What do you see when you look at this little guy?*

N: *He's looking down at his feet.*

M: *What do you think he is feeling?*

N: *I don't know. That he should have done something. That what happened was his fault.*

M: *When you look at his little face, what do you think he was feeling, seeing such violence?*

N: *Scared...he felt scared.*

M: *Where is that feeling of being scared in his little body?*

N: *In his chest and gut. Really tight and hard to breathe.*

M: *When you look at this little guy, what do you see now?*

N: *He's looking up at me.*

M: *What do you see when you look in his eyes?*

N: *He's really scared. Terrified.*

M: *So, remember how tall you said this little guy was?*

N: *Yeah.*

M: *How big was your mother's boyfriend?*

N: *Close to my size now. Little smaller maybe.*

M: *Is there any way you, at the size you were when you were four, could have overpowered someone close to your size?*

N: *I don't know...maybe not.*

M: *You've lived a lot longer than that little guy and know a lot of things that he doesn't. What if he could hear you? What would you say to that little guy, knowing how terrified he was? What would you say to him that might help him?*

N: *I don't know...maybe that he tried to stop what happened. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't stop it but he tried.*

M: *Can you look at that little guy in your mind's eye and say that to him directly?*

[silence while Nathan speaks to his child part of self]

M: *If that little guy could hear you say that it wasn't his fault but that he tried to help, what do you think he would say back to you?*

N: *He says he was just so scared and wanted it to stop.*

M: *What do you think this little guy needs that would help him with how scared he is?*

N: *He just wants someone to hold him. He never had that. I never had that.*

M: *What do you think it would be like if adult you held that little guy in your mind's eye?*

[Silence while Nathan closes his eyes. He visibly relaxes]**

This session marked the first time Nathan was able to feel compassion towards the part of himself he always

**This interaction represents a general approach and is heavily influenced by Jim Knipe and Sandra Paulsen. It is also absent of the EMDR sets I use on a regular basis as I recognize that not everyone reading this article is an EMDR therapist, and I want to emphasize conceptual rather than procedural processes.

considered weak. After this, we started seeing major reductions in how much that memory was invading his present life.

In my practice, I strongly believe that the “criminal” and the “addict” need to begin to view themselves with compassion before any real change can occur, and I have found that this compassion needs to start with the younger versions of self that have often been forgotten. Focusing on seeing the little-boy part of our client's self can also help us as counsellors get past our own biases and view our clients with true compassion.

In no way do I intend to excuse the actions people have taken in their lives to result in incarceration; however, once that little boy is brought into the present in a way that allows for connection, love, and acceptance, I have been privileged to see the years-long impact of trauma melt away as it is integrated more adaptively into the system. This is also when I see positive shifts in addiction cycles, likelihood to engage in further criminal behaviour, and overall quality of life. ■

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