

Season 3 | Episode 39

How to Heal from Disabling Trauma and PTSD

Dr. Tim Lane

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Today is Veterans Day, and as we honor those who served in the United States Armed Forces to defend our freedoms and sacrifice for the common good, we recognize the men and women who returned from service and now live with distressing, even disabling memories of what they've experienced. Many have been deeply affected by such disturbing events, which often result in post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Today, we're joined by counselor and Founder of the Institute for Pastoral Care, Dr. Timothy Lane, to speak with us about PTSD. As you listen in, whether you face disabling memories from combat, sexual or physical abuse, serious health problems, or a traumatic accident, it's our hope this conversation comforts you, that you are not alone in your struggle. Jesus who himself suffered intensely, is with you, and you can trust him to guide you through the gradual process of healing. So with that said, welcome to the podcast, Tim.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Thanks, Crystal. It's great to be with you today.

Crystal Keating:

So maybe we can start out just by defining PTSD. How would you describe post-traumatic stress disorder?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah, good question. By the way, my dad was a Marine and I witnessed just him coming back from Vietnam, seeing some of the symptoms of PTSD, that at the time as a young boy, I didn't understand. But now looking back, I do. So I certainly identify with your veterans out there in your audience. PTSD, it sounds like a real technical term, but put real simply, PTSD is the experience of having an event or a series of events that are life-threatening, that make someone feel unsafe, out of control, and the result of those experiences or that event live on in the person's life for months and years.

Crystal Keating:

That's really important to understand because even though the event is finished, the memories still stay with someone, and they affect them in a really strong and powerful way, and like you



said, PTSD is often associated with service members, someone like your father, but what are some of the causes of PTSD you're seeing in your own counseling practice?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah, and I think it's important to recognize too that traumatic events, life-threatening, out of control events impacts different people differently.

Crystal Keating:

That is very true, yeah.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah. So children are more susceptible if they grow up in a chaotic, abusive context, because developmentally, their autonomic nervous systems and their brains are just in those early stages of development, and it can impact them in profound ways. Oftentimes, women can be impacted more than men, but all of us can, and it's just important to realize all of us respond to traumatic events in different ways. I think even statistics say that 40% of people will face some kind of major traumatic event in their lives, but not necessarily everybody that experiences trauma will develop PTSD. I think they say the percentages are changing, but maybe eight to 12% will experience PTSD in their lifetime.

Crystal Keating:

So you're saying it's how we're responding to those traumatic events?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Correct, and for different types of reasons, different people are more vulnerable and susceptible to developing PTSD, which is basically the experience of the past event always seeming to somehow work its way into the present, through various triggers that we can talk about later. But it's seen in the people that return from combat, obviously, if a child experiences any kind of abuse, or just growing up in a really chaotic home. I see it quite often in couples that I counsel where there's been infidelity, so the spouse that has been betrayed evidences PTSD trauma responses. And so, oftentimes, working with couples where there's been infidelity, being very patient with the betrayed spouse as they struggle through the shock that is a part of finding out that their spouse has been unfaithful. "I thought I was in a safe relationship, someone I could trust," and that has been violated, that trust has been broken, and the experience of the betrayed spouse is very much a trauma-based response.

I've seen it in people who are in toxic workplace environments where gaslighting, as they have come to call it, or bullying has happened. We see it in situations where people have abused their power and treated people that are in less powerful positions than them, in ways that impact a person adversely and they experience trauma responses as a result. So, it can happen in all kinds of different contexts. If you go through a horrific tornado or hurricane, when storms come through our country, you just know that there's going to be trauma responses in many of those individuals that have lived through that natural disaster. So anything that gives someone a sense of, "I'm out of control, I'm unsafe and there's nothing I can do about it," that creates a context where PTSD can develop.



Crystal Keating:

In the context of even disability, some of the people that we've interviewed have talked about trauma responses from being hospitalized multiple times, especially as children. So certain sounds trigger them, smells, hearing the beeping of machines, smelling an alcohol wipe, even now in their 30s and 40s, can trigger a kind of automatic response of sweat, or they start getting anxious. So, what are some of the manifestations or symptoms that can occur in response to traumatic events in a person's life?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah, so your world has been shaken. What you thought was safe is not, and our bodies, the way God has designed us, our brains and our autonomic nervous systems are completely wired to keep us alive. It's all about survival. And so, oftentimes, the trauma responses are attempts to survive. Here are just a few things that oftentimes will happen after a traumatic event, if it develops into post-traumatic stress disorder: People experience intrusive thoughts, so the event will intrude into the present. Nightmares. They will begin to avoid reminders of the event. Some people experience memory loss, negative thoughts about themselves and the world. They can develop anger and irritability. They can lose interest in activities that they once enjoyed. Hypervigilance.

I work with a combat veteran and when he came back from Afghanistan, he had been in some pretty horrific situations and had to do things that actually violated his conscience, but when he came back, he said, "I never go into a room or a gymnasium, or anywhere without looking for the exit signs." There's that sense of hypervigilance. "I am on alert for something bad to happen, and if it does, I know exactly where I need to go, in order to find safety." People will experience difficulty concentrating, insomnia is a huge part of PTSD, and oftentimes why people will self-medicate, just so that they can go to sleep. They're trying to numb that part of their brain, their amygdala, that is their smoke detector for danger, and it is ringing all the time. It's always kind of scanning the environment. So insomnia, vivid-

Crystal Keating:

So that's whether there's actual danger or not, the amygdala is on high alert.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

Is it like they're experiencing danger even when there is some semblance of safety? Is that what you're saying?

Dr. Tim Lane:

That's right. So what's going on in the brain is the limbic region of the brain, which is where the emotions are formed and where memories are formed, that part of the brain has become highly sensitized to danger, and that's a wonderful part of the brain. If someone's chasing me with a knife, I want to go into fight-or-flight mode, but if I'm sitting in a restaurant and I look over and I see somebody with a knife, and that triggers an incident maybe where I was actually chased by someone with a knife, I don't want to go into fight-or-flight mode in that situation, but the body,



and the memories, and the emotions that are associated with that almost break into the present. And so, PTSD is a very brain/body-based struggle.

Crystal Keating:

Well, let's talk about the scriptures. If we look at our concordance, we don't see the label "post-dramatic stress disorder," but the Bible has story after story of God-fearing men and women who have been through horrible situations, and this is one of the reasons I love the Bible, because nothing's off the table. It is about true life. And so, people who've encountered extremely distressing events are mentioned. So how does scripture speak into this?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah. Well, if anxiety, and fear, and trauma are part of your experience, then the book that you want to become very familiar with is the Bible. It's written in a context of violence, and you see so many examples of trauma and the broader category of just suffering all throughout scripture. And so, the question isn't, "Where do I cherry pick a verse here or there to kind of speak to PTSD?" It's "Well, where do I begin, from Genesis to Revelation?" Because the Bible is all about suffering, trauma, and how God, in his redemptive purposes, enters into that suffering and that trauma in the person of his own Son, who experiences himself trauma and suffering in our behalf, for the purpose of healing and redeeming us. So, the grace of God is very much on display in the midst of the storyline of the Bible, which is very much a storyline of violence, and trauma, and suffering.

Crystal Keating:

And that is good news that God is with us through the many difficulties that people of faith have experienced throughout the history of time. Well, in your experience as a counselor, what are the moral and spiritual questions people are wrestling with after a traumatic event or a long-term trauma has occurred?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah. So before I answer that, I do want to say that the themes that come through loud and clear in scripture, when you look at people who are experiencing suffering, is one, the Bible, and God's voice in scripture starts with compassion to those who are suffering, not guilt and shame. It's just a very tender way that God speaks to those who are suffering, and then what the Bible does is it points us to two places where we can find safety, and that is essential for healing when it comes to trauma, because trauma is "I'm unsafe."

And what you find in the Bible is a God who himself is a safe place to find rest and refuge, and we know that because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but also, he points us to community. It is so essential to find safe community. One, it takes the shame away from the experience where I can tend to isolate and think, "I'm the only person in the world who's struggling like this," but no, you're not, and we need to create safe spaces for people who can talk about their experiences and their traumatic events, and just how they're dealing with it.

So, in answer to your question a moment ago, people are asking all kinds of questions. Suffering always creates a context for questions. One of them is, "Can I trust God?"

Crystal Keating:

Yes.



Dr. Tim Lane:

"Why did he let this happen?" Those are perfectly legitimate questions, and the Psalmist oftentimes is asking, "Why, oh Lord? Why? How long? Why? How long is this going to continue? Can I trust other people?", especially if the trauma that you experienced was the result of another person. "Who am I? Why me? Is God punishing me for something that I've done in my past?" Emotionally, because trauma impacts that emotional part of the brain, oftentimes, people will experience a lot of emotional dysregulation, and they're all over the map. Anger, fear, doubt, loneliness, and you just named a host of emotions. They're a sea of emotions in the midst of trauma, and it's oftentimes why when we try to come alongside someone to help them, it can be particularly challenging, so.

Crystal Keating:

Especially if the person themselves feels like the emotions are out of even their control.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Crystal Keating:

I know in my experience, working with people who've suffered trauma, their situations frighten them, and I think there's a sense of shame. Maybe let's talk a little bit about shame and trauma, how those two things go hand in hand.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Shame is this deep experience that, "There's something deeply flawed in wrong with me," and another way people talk about it is, "I'm not enough. I'm unclean, I'm unworthy," and oftentimes, when you experience trauma, when something happens to you, especially if it's in the form of sexual abuse, or verbal or physical abuse, people can take on an identity that is more shame-based, and the inner critic or the inner voice that tends to be most prominent in their minds is, "There's something really wrong with me." And that's where oftentimes, people get stuck, and it's why finding a group can be the first step to addressing and beginning to face that shame narrative. "Wait a minute. I'm not the only one again. There are other people who've been through this, and this isn't something that I did necessarily, it's something that was done to me. It's a form of suffering, and it's impacted me at a very deep level, but it doesn't mean that I'm fundamentally flawed," in that sense that oftentimes shame wants to make us feel.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and I think when we feel shame, we don't want to be in community. We do, but we don't. There's this tension of shame makes us hide, shame keeps us secretive, because I wouldn't want anyone else to know what I think of myself, what I think other people think of me, or what's happened to me. And one of the things that you were saying about sexual abuse or verbal abuse, not always, but many times, it happens in very intimate, close, long-term relationships, parent to a child, spouse, and those are very hard narratives to break. And so, I love that you talk about invite God in, but then we also need long-term community to help us heal.



Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah, there's no way out of it other than through that kind of safe patient community, where people come alongside of us and begin to help us experience safety again, and part of what's happening is you're starting to calm that limbic region of the brain down through safe community. Human beings are pack animals. We've survived in community, and so, the only way to-

Crystal Keating:

That's why COVID has really messed us up, I just have to say that. This whole time has totally disrupted our pattern of gathering. Haven't you seen that mental health issues are through the roof?

Dr. Tim Lane:

My clients have increased, couples who are struggling in their marriage, they're saying, "We finally need to reach out for help, because we're not surviving." And so, that sense of being alone and isolated is very problematic, because it's within safe community that we thrive and survive best, and it's because God has made us in his image, and God is three persons. He's a social God, and we were wired by him to a need one another and depend upon one another, and that's why it's so devastating when young children who are being brought up in a context where they are supposed to be the safest, when they experience the opposite of that, it is incredibly impactful and devastating.

And so, you're right. We've got to find safe community, and unfortunately, sometimes our churches aren't safe places because we don't know what to do with people who are emotionally dysregulated, and confused, and hurting. And so, broadening our ability to appreciate people and different experiences of suffering, and knowing that not everybody's going to fit within what we would consider normal, right? There's a broader normal than oftentimes how we define normal, and so, we have a lot of work to do in our churches to help our leaders and people create that safe space for folks.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's such a good point. Well, we talk about community and finding safe communities. So what are some of the other keys to beginning the healing process in response to these distressing, even disabling memories?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). One of the things obviously, is getting help, safe community, find maybe a counselor who is trauma-informed, ask them, "Have you experienced trauma in your history? What training have you done so that you understand the nature of trauma, and the PTSD response to trauma?" Support groups, where they're designed specifically to be a safe place to come out of hiding, and to not let shame push you off into the corners, which is what it loves to do.

Shame is actually a very powerful emotion and it's a survival instinct, but in times past, if you did something in the community that wasn't acceptable and you got kicked out, you would die, because you wouldn't have access to food or shelter. And so, shame is actually a survival response, "I'm going to hide, because if people find out what I'm really like, they'll kick me out," and that's why safe community and allowing that person to come out of hiding is so important,



and how does the Bible begin to speak into this experience of suffering that you've endured and that you've experienced, and finding resources that can help you connect with God in the very midst of your struggle.

Crystal Keating:

That is so good and going back to what you said about the care of Jesus and his posture of compassion and mercy toward us, and as we embody him and we create that safe community, we can manifest the spirit of Jesus toward others who are dealing with shame. Once you get started in that healing process, what does it look like over time? Are there typical patterns people will experience through healing?

Dr. Tim Lane:

I'm convinced that God can break in and do anything in any-

Crystal Keating:

Amen, yes.

Dr. Tim Lane:

... kind of struggle, and sometimes we see those miraculous growth spurts. I've experienced them in areas of my life, but in general, by and large, the change process, particularly when it's something more entrenched, is often slow and it's up and down, and it's going to last a long time, and sometimes it may be a lifetime, and how does God use that area of weakness to really display his power and strength in your life? I meet with people all the time, and one of the things that's a central part of my counseling is just spending time getting to know their story, and someone will come into my office and say, "Here's what I'm struggling with," and it may be trauma, it may be deep anxiety, it may be depression, whatever the case may be.

And I spend several hours just listening to them tell me their story, and I'm asking questions, and by the end of that conversation, I'm thinking, "Well, no wonder you're struggling in this way. If I had been through what you had been through, I would be struggling with the same thing." And so, in one sense, you're very normal. I tell people "You're not a freak, you're very normal, and it makes a lot of sense why you are where you are," and then obviously, giving them some hope, but I think just time and living with the ebb and flow, and the ups and downs of the growth and grace process is really important.

I know with grief, and sometimes grief is connected with trauma because there's loss, everybody responds to trauma and grief differently, but I have heard that oftentimes, when there's been grief, the first 10 months after loss is what they call acute grief, the first two years are early grief, and grief doesn't begin to resolve and move into a place of resolution and meaning for three or four years.

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Dr. Tim Lane:

So that may be discouraging to some people, but it also could be encouraging. It's okay if this takes time. I've been through experiences of grief, and I look back and I think, "Yeah, three or



four years, that's about right. That's what I experienced." And so, I think just encouraging people to be patient with themselves, and also for us to be patient with them. It's all about grace, and grace is God's patience with us, and we ought to do that not only with ourselves, but those whom God has called us to care for.

Crystal Keating:

Being patient is so important, and even just that expectation of all of us, we go through ups and downs. So let's talk about coming alongside and helping our friends who are dealing with PTSD. Can you share a little bit more about how we can minister and encourage them? How can we be supportive and sensitive, and just be with them through the healing process, and how can we equip churches to receive and welcome people who have disabling PTSD? I know this is something you're very passionate about, is helping build up the church to be a safe place and help them find their place in the body of Christ.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Yeah. Yeah, so we could come at this from many different angles, but I would say churches that will bring in trained, experienced people to say, "This is what trauma does to people. This is the impact that it has on them," and to do some teaching and training is really helpful. Finding people that are at a place where they're able to tell their stories and say, "This is what I've been through, and here's what's been helpful." One of the things that does, is it not only equips, but guess what else it does? It takes the shame away. So people say, "Oh, so there are people in this church who've experienced trauma, and they're struggling with the symptoms of what would typically be considered PTSD symptoms," and I think that's important, and then we're oftentimes alarmed by what we don't understand.

Crystal Keating:

That is so true.

Dr. Tim Lane:

And we all have our ways of reacting when we don't understand somebody and their behaviors, and oftentimes, I think in church context, particularly when you have someone who's evidencing PTSD symptoms, is it can look like just rebellious anger, high-handed sin. And so, we do what we know best, we confront. And oftentimes, that anger, because anger is a surface emotion, that what's under that anger are deep anxieties, or shame, fears, rejection, guilt.

And so, not being duped by a person's surface emotion of anger and being able to say, "Hey, you're really angry. Tell me about that. Help me understand where that's coming from. Tell me your story and what's going on in that anger? And how can I just be a friend, so when you're experiencing this, rather than reacting to you, coming alongside and comforting you, and encouraging you, and walking with you?" That's counterintuitive to most of us, but it is the very thing that when a person experiences that they're like, "Oh, that felt safe. I like that," but I think equipping and just learning that if we're not familiar with something, if we don't understand something, we don't have to immediately react or try to fix the problem. We can invite the person in and say, "Tell me your story, tell me what's going on."



Crystal Keating:

And I think that's such good advice because there is a sense for helpers to feel like they want to fix it, and they need to have the answers, but if we can release ourselves of that responsibility and that burden that we really can't do anyway, but to listen to people, I just love what you said, that helps them feel safe. We spoke with CCEF, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation's Counselor, Darby Strickland, on trauma, and she provided a helpful resource for churches. It's free, it's training for coming alongside people who have been abused. It's "Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused," and I think certainly, people who struggle with PTSD, people in the church would benefit from this training. It's at churchcares.com. So I just wanted to share that resource for those who are listening, who say, yeah, we want to be a church who has a time like you said that has people who can share.

One of the most eye-opening things for me is I go to a large church and our church is just a beautiful place, a lot of beautiful people, and I kind of come in and think, "I wonder what people are really struggling with." So I started reading the prayer list, and then that's when you really see, "You know what? People are really going through hard times," and on Sunday, we may not see that, but underneath, people are going through difficult struggles, and we need one another. We need a safe place to be able to process, to talk about it.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Absolutely. There's a couple of series of books, one is in the Loving Someone With series, and there's one that says Loving Someone with PTSD. They've got other books on anxiety, or depression, or bipolar, but that's a good series. It's not written from a distinctively Christian point of view, but just great research and helpful practical advice. And then there's another series that I often recommend to people, it's in the Arterburn Wellness series, it's called Understanding and Loving a Person With, and then they have similar books on depression, PTSD, and it is coming from a Christian point of view. So those are two book series that I would recommend for people who are not only living with, or in relationship with someone who's struggling with PTSD, but as they think about small group leaders as a church, how can we better understand this issue, and how do we better care for people who are struggling in this way?

Crystal Keating:

That's good. I had not heard of those two. Thank you for that suggestion. Well, Tim, as we close our time together, how have you seen God work in and through traumatic experiences people have survived?

Dr. Tim Lane:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). They are very wise, and they have a sense of the fragility of life, and they don't take for granted that everything should or will turn out okay, and there's something deeply wise about that. James talks about how we shouldn't just go from one city to the next thinking, "We're going to build this business, and we're going to make money here and we're going to make money there," he says. The wise person says, "If God wills," and there is this sense in which what I've seen with people who've experienced traumas, they hold loosely to life's blessings, but they're also able to process and work through suffering, and that's a very wise person to be able to live in that space with grace. I am always amazed and humbled by people who've experienced significant trauma and their faith is still robust, and they believe and trust

and live in God's grace, very encouraging to me, and they are people that can provide incredible encouragement to the body of Christ, if we will give them an opportunity and a voice.

Crystal Keating:

Those are some good words. Dr. Timothy Lane is the author of the booklet called PTSD: Healing for Bad Memories, and it's available on Amazon and on the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation website, ccef.org. Tim, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with us today on this very important topic.

Dr. Tim Lane:

Oh, you're very welcome, Crystal. Thank you very much.

Crystal Keating:

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