

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Radical Self-Love: An Alternative Trauma Response

by **Ivory Bennett** with **Lauren Lynch-Novakovic**

Radical self-love may sound like a bunch of unfounded buzz words that are trending on Twitter, but its concept, practice, and impact is much deeper and incredibly profound, especially in the lives of those with trauma. I have encountered a lot of traumatized people over the years — my peers, my students, their parents, my co-workers, my friends, and my family — many of whom also have lived experience in the child welfare system. And while I do not believe in telling the stories of others without their explicit consent, the average narrative reads of defeat, despair, and victimhood. Navigating the child welfare system is an incredibly difficult and arduous journey that often includes, but is not limited to, abuse, neglect, poverty, and overall adversity. In fact, I have experienced all of those things and more. I spend a great deal of my time advocating for sustainable, equitable change for current and former foster youth, and people often ask, “but, what made the difference for you, Ivory?” Long story short: radical self-love as a trauma response made a positive difference in my life.

First, what is radical self-love? Sonya Renee Taylor’s book, *The Body is Not an Apology*, states that “radical self-love is our inherent state of being as worthy and enough. It is the unobstructed access to our highest selves.”¹ Personally, radical self-love is showing up for myself always, in all ways; it is a kind of unwavering, internal validation, and a never-ending competition between me, myself, and I to be the best version of me that is possible. This drive probably began in elementary school; academia is a place where I have always felt empowered, engaged, and excited. I grew up with a passionate love of learning, always knowing that I would graduate high school and attend college! My love of learning transferred into love of self

1. Taylor, S. R. (2021). *The body is not an apology: The power of radical self-love*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

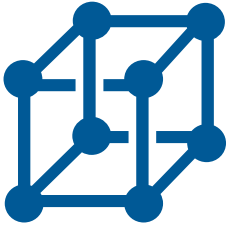


ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ivory Bennett (she/her/hers), is a published millennial author currently working in Dallas, Texas, as a dual-accredited English teacher and a cheer coach at a Title 1 Collegiate Academy. She is a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, native and former foster youth with 17 years of lived experience. Outside of work, Ivory is a national equity advocate for education and foster care. Holistic health and well-being are integral pillars of her personal and professional pedagogies.



Lauren Lynch-Novakovic is a Cleveland, Ohio, native with a background in social work, early childhood education, community organizing, advocacy, electoral campaigns, and government. Understanding the concepts of interconnectedness in all things and intentionality are an overarching guide for her life.



because it was my mind and my body engaging as a student-learner. Rupi Kaur said, “how to love yourself is how you teach others to love.”² My radical self-love for my identity as a student was transformative in all facets of my identity.

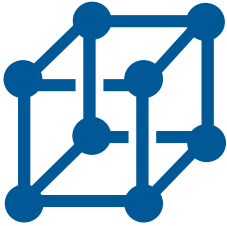
Radical self-love includes, among many other things, knowing oneself and being true to and honoring that person. In order to arrive at this bold place most of us have baggage we must unpack and dispose of healthily. That baggage is commonly known as trauma. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “...an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster.”³ And according to the National Council for Behavioral Health, roughly 70% of adults (223+ million Americans) have experienced various degrees and types of trauma.⁴ All types of trauma are capable of negatively rewiring the brain, and when combined with other Adverse Childhood Experiences, such as child welfare system involvement, individuals are more likely to be negatively impacted in all aspects of their beings: mind, body, and spirit.⁵ And while scientists do not quite understand the natural resiliency of some and the sensitive susceptibilities of others, all vested stakeholders must acknowledge there are things we do not know that we do not know. Awareness of blind spots, particularly how traumas have influenced the story of self, world views, and thoughts, behaviors, and patterns, is critical.⁶ Arguably, the most important thing that individuals impacted by trauma can do is to move from existing and surviving on autopilot into the realm of living, thriving, and flourishing with intention and purpose while being fully present in life.

I consulted one of my best friends and community practitioner, Lauren Lynch-Novakovic, on the steps one can take to achieve and maintain radical self-love. Her insight as a trained social worker with a holistic healing-centered pedagogy resulted in the AWARE framework. This mnemonic device helps to easily sum up the stages of entering the depths of trauma and coming out on the other side, changed for the better:

A W A R E
Acknowledge
Wonder + **W**isdom
Accept
Recall + **R**epair + **R**elease
Embody

Acknowledge: We must first acknowledge there is something amiss. If you continually avoid and distance yourself from the reality of things, you cannot do this very meaningful work. It is not to assume fault, to judge oneself or anyone else, but to simply acknowledge a need for healing.

2. Kaur, R. (2018). *Milk and honey*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing.
 3. Trauma and Shock. (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2021, from <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma#:~:text=Trauma>.
 4. National Council for Mental Wellbeing - Homepage. (2021, May 04). Retrieved May 14, 2021, from <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Trauma-infographic.pdf?dof=375ateTbd56>.
 5. Harris, N. B. (2020). *The Deepest Well*. Pan Macmillan.
 6. Nam, S. S. (2019). *The pocket guru: Guidance and mantras for spiritual awakening and emotional wisdom*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.



Wonder + Wisdom: Secondly, one must go within and ask, “how could this trauma and my response have come to be?” Tracing this back to the root can often require professional services and outside help like a life coach, spiritual advisor, or therapist. Gather the wisdom of others to help you navigate, strategize, and heal. Find a community of people with similar traumas and healing intentions; it may make the journey easier.

Accept: Accept that this is where you are. But understand that it is not where you will end up. Accept the consequences of your actions (or inactions) — how you may have placed yourself here and/or kept yourself there. But more importantly, acknowledge how you will dig yourself out of a detrimental trauma response behavior pattern.

Recall + Repair + Release: This is the most intensive step. Uncovering and loosening years of trauma, stress, emotions, and baggage is grueling. Often things we have buried, avoided, and even disassociated from will viscerally rise to the surface. There will be grief in your growth. You will address things head on and grow the muscle of objective observation while re-parenting your inner child and releasing the old stories you’ve let run on loop. Your entire life will require a release of the old you and a shifting and changing to open up for the new you. Remember, it is worth it!

Embody: Now integrate the lessons and cultivate a lifestyle with a toolkit that helps you cut through the old, reprogram, and strategize for future encounters with trauma and triggers. Repeat the whole process again but with more information, more knowledge, and healthier coping skills in your arsenal. Move forward with the newfound confidence that you are capable of taking on the world and any challenge, now that you have mastered yourself.

It is certainly easier said than done. There is no timetable during the lifelong journey of radical self-love. Each person is different. Beyond that, it is best achieved through experiential learning. Utilizing the frameworks, guidelines, and other resources necessary for healing makes life easier to maneuver, enables more effective navigation of experiences, and ultimately allows for a deeper engagement with and appreciation of life. ■