

LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE



TRAPPED BY CIRCUMSTANCES, TRANSFORMED BY CHOICE

By Kristen Powell



Content Warning: This article discusses human trafficking and may contain descriptions of exploitation, abuse, and trauma. If you feel triggered or overwhelmed while reading, prioritize your wellbeing. Consider taking breaks, reaching out to a trusted individual for support, or accessing resources for mental health assistance. Remember, self-care is important.

Today we will unpack the psychological bondage that victims and survivors of human trafficking endure while on the streets and how current systems of care can sometimes push survivors back into the streets. People often think that when someone is trafficked, they are physically tied up or being held against their will. In the United States, it is more common to be coerced and manipulated into staying with a trafficker, especially when a trauma bond is formed. A trauma bond forms when someone has an unhealthy attachment to the person abusing them. The entrapment is not physical — it is a battle between the heart and mind. When teens run away it is easy to be recruited into trafficking.

Grooming, a process that happens over time, involves tactics like making the victim feel loved, lavishing gifts and fancy dates, and making them think they're in a romantic relationship with their trafficker. Teens are often recruited into trafficking by their peers or by a boyfriend/girlfriend/partner who is in the game. According to [VAWnet.org](https://www.vawnet.org), "Traffickers focus on individuals who are without means, lack stable social support or family

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KRISTEN NICOLE POWELL is a passionate and creative community leader who cofounded [The Lost & Found Institute \(LFI\)](https://www.lostandfoundinstitute.org) in 2023. LFI's mission is "Through healing and honoring our humanity we are eliminating the oppression of our people." The Lost & Found Institute works with youth and young adults who have been impacted by systems of care and trauma to help them navigate transformative organizing, liberation, and healing.

Kristen has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and sociology from Wichita State University and has worked in various roles that involve survivor-informed, survivor-led services, holistic healing, journalism, research, and social justice. She worked as the Community Engagement Bureau Manager at The Wichita Beacon, a nonprofit newsroom that engages community representatives in critical conversations that inform their product. She is also a member of the National Advisory Council on Children's Legal Representation, a group of young professionals and advocates who advise the National Association of Counsel for Children on projects, policies, and partnerships. Kristen has received multiple awards and recognition for her dedication and inspiration, such as the Light the Way Youth Award and the Soroptimist International Live Your Dream Award.

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support. Runaway and homeless youth, foster youth, LGBT youth, and Native American youth are at a high risk of being trafficked.”

System-involved youth often crave love and belonging, making it easy to become attached to people who welcome them with open arms and bad intentions. Often, youth find this acceptance through unhealthy relationships, gangs, or a trafficking ring. Being system-involved, bouncing around multiple placements and schools, often leaves youth with limited ties to lifelong connections, healthy relationships, and mentors. When working with these communities it is important to exercise more empathy and understanding. It is also imperative that adults develop trusting relationships because it takes victims and survivors time to ask for the support they need. After all, they’ve always been forced to accept the bare minimum.

When interacting with survivors of trafficking, it is important to approach them with sensitivity and respect, avoiding questions that place blame or undermine their experiences. Asking questions like “Why didn’t you just leave?” or “Did you feel like you would be hurt if you tried to leave?” can be deeply harmful and re-traumatizing. These questions not only overlook the complex power dynamics and coercion tactics used in trafficking, but they also place blame on the survivor, suggesting they had the ability or choice to leave. Questions like these may trigger feelings of guilt, shame, and self-doubt in survivors, leading them to shut down emotionally and withdraw from seeking help or support.

We must recognize and acknowledge survivors’ systemic challenges when seeking help. Despite efforts across the country to combat human trafficking, systems often respond with a punitive approach, which can deepen a survivor’s feelings of shame and result in punishment in the name of “keeping them safe.” Minor survivors often experience excessive measures such as incarceration, involuntary commitment, or strict restrictions and rules that strip away their autonomy and agency. When authorities and caretakers punish survivors, they may feel that they are being further controlled and manipulated. A lot of the rules within the child welfare system mirror the coercion tactics used by traffickers. Some examples of this are supervised phone calls, not having access to a phone or social media, being cut off from their connections and community, and not being allowed to go out with friends or to a friend’s house unless they complete a background check. This reinforcement of power imbalance can deepen the sense of helplessness experienced by survivors, and cause feelings of being constantly trapped.

Punitive responses can also reinforce survivors’ feelings of marginalization within society. When survivors are stigmatized or criminalized, this isolates them from support networks and opportunities for healing. This can also affect a survivor’s ability to access essential resources and services because they may fear judgment or discrimination when seeking assistance. These types of responses not only fail to address the root causes of trafficking but also perpetuate a cycle of victimization and re-traumatization.

When survivors start to feel helpless or trapped, their instinct might be to run. This is often the result of enduring immense physical, emotional, and psychological trauma, coupled with a sense of powerlessness and entrapment within their circumstances. Trafficking survivors frequently experience psychological distress, including feelings of hopelessness and fear. Exploitation can erode a person’s sense of self-worth and agency, leading to a pervasive belief that escape is impossible. The desire for freedom

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and autonomy is a fundamental human instinct. Despite the risks involved, survivors may be driven by an intense longing to break free and regain control over their lives. This longing can outweigh the fear of repercussions from the system, pushing them to run away to reclaim their dignity and basic human rights.

If we do not change our policies and practices to be more relationship-focused and rooted in humanity and love, we will continue to see survivors who never stop running until they age out of care.

What can we do to build trust between trafficking survivors and system professionals?

Survivor-specific aftercare is essential to the healing process for those who have experienced human trafficking. This does not only respond to the immediate needs of survivors but also their long-term wellbeing. Upon rescue or escape from trafficking situations, survivors often require immediate access to safe housing, medical care, and trauma-informed therapy. Motivational interviewing is a technique that emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and autonomy, aiming to activate motivation for change within people. Adopting a trauma-informed and empathetic approach that acknowledges the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by survivors is essential for building trust. Motivational interviewing techniques can help survivors explore their motivations, goals, and strengths while affirming their agency and resilience in navigating the complexities of their experiences.

Community support and peer mentorship also play an important role in the long-term healing process. Building connections with other survivors who have walked similar paths can provide a sense of solidarity, community, and empowerment. Peer support groups and survivor-led organizations offer safe spaces for survivors to share their experiences, learn from one another, and create a shared sense of belonging. Access to vocational training and educational opportunities is a key part of survivors regaining their independence and building a sustainable future free from exploitation.

In addition to direct services, legal assistance is needed for survivors to address any legal barriers or issues such as obtaining protective orders, navigating the criminal justice system, or pursuing compensation through victim restitution programs. By advocating for survivors' rights and providing access to legal resources, we can help them reclaim agency over their lives and pursue justice against their traffickers (if this will help them feel safe and heal from harm).

For professionals and individuals seeking to support survivors of human trafficking, stay informed and educated about trauma-informed care and survivor-centered approaches. Seek out training programs, workshops, resources, and tools for effectively serving survivors and advocating for systemic change. As we navigate the complexities of human trafficking, it's important to recognize the layers of trauma faced by survivors and the systemic barriers that often limit their access to support and justice. ■