

PRESS RELEASE
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For Immediate Release
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PRESS RELEASE

Raising Awareness About America's "Most Devastating & Least Discussed" Social Challenge – And What We Can All Do to Empower Children & Break the Cycle



Inspired by Personal Tragedy, Dr. Linda Olson Offers Families & Children the Keys to Overcoming Childhood Domestic Violence – A National Crisis Affecting The Lives of 1 Out of Every 7 People in the U.S.

Introducing the "Project Hope Bear" For All of Us to Let Children Who Have Lost a Loved One to Violence or Witnessed Violence Know That We Care

"If we don't transform our pain, we will most assuredly transform it onto others." -- Fr. Richard Rohr

(ATLANTA, GA – May 11, 2018) It's a startling paradox – a devastating crisis that affects one billion people around the globe and, at the same time, an issue that is rarely mentioned by the news media or in everyday conversation. The name of this destructive crisis is "Childhood Domestic Violence" – the impact experienced by children who grow up in a household where there is domestic violence. According to UNICEF, 275 children around the world are currently impacted by CDV, as well as an estimated 40 million American adults. Atlanta-based Psychologist and Psychotherapist Linda Olson knows firsthand the painful toll it has taken on millions of individuals and families. This tragic "well-kept secret" affects one out of every seven people in the U.S. -- and for the past 30 years, Dr. Olson has made it her life's work to raise awareness about this terrible problem, as she shows children and adults how they can free themselves from CDV's destructive cycle.

A “Perfect Storm” for Disempowering Emotions & Other Tragic Results

“Children who live in households where they are exposed to domestic violence grow up in constant fear, with a result that has a damaging impact on their neurochemistry,” Dr. Olson says. Research conducted by Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, pediatrician and founder of the Center for Youth Wellness, has found that adverse childhood experiences (including CDV) have a direct and measurable negative effect on their health.

In fact, young children exposed to domestic violence suffer the same kind of trauma similar to the PTSD experienced by military veterans – a trauma that research has found literally “rewires” their brain, with a destructive and lasting impact. Numerous studies have found that growing up in a household surrounded by domestic violence serves as a tragic “perfect storm,” producing a myriad of negative and disempowering emotions in young children.

Dr. Olson grew up in a household like this and can vividly recall the terror that she experienced every day as a girl. “I grew up always being afraid,” she says. “I was constantly in terror, wondering ‘What’s going to happen next?’” As a result, children like this grow up in a hyper state of arousal – and the result is not only an inability to focus on schoolwork or think about the future, but also deep feelings of guilt, hopelessness and worthlessness. “Children often feel they should somehow be able to change the situation in their home,” she says, “and when they find that this is not possible, they feel worthless and like it’s somehow their fault.”

Caught up in their own – sometimes literal – “life-and-death struggle,” in CDV households, the child’s parents rarely have the presence of mind to reassure the child, to let them know the violence they see unfolding before their eyes is not their fault. “There’s no talking about it inside the home, and no talking about it with others outside the home,” Dr. Olson says. “These children grow up thinking, ‘I can’t be a kid. It’s not safe to be a kid.’”

In addition, children in this situation experience a tremendous sense of sadness. “These kids really have lost their childhood,” she says. “And the saddest part is they don’t understand. They don’t understand why they are so fearful, lack confidence and feel so guilty.”

As a result – and a response to this never-ending sense of crisis – these children live in a constant state of reactivity, experiencing fear, depression and anger. As they grow older, during their teenage and adult years, it should come as no surprise that their own relationships are powerfully and toxically affected by the behavior they have witnessed, compounded by these destructive emotions and low sense of self-esteem.

According to Dr. Olson, this overwhelming feeling that life is out of control also manifests itself in a tremendous sense of loneliness. “You’re not going to feel connected to others because you don’t trust other people,” she says. “How can you trust others if you can’t trust the most significant people in your life – your mom and dad? In addition, you don’t learn to trust yourself because your feelings, thoughts or urges are constantly being invalidated. Over time, this constant invalidation – underscoring the child’s sense of worthlessness – may be the most damaging effect of all.”

It’s important to keep in mind that these negative and disempowering emotions are being experienced by children at the most vulnerable and impressionable phase of their development – between infancy and the age of six. As a result, Dr. Olson says, “You have to essentially unlearn all the lies, or negative internalized beliefs, that have literally been internalized into your DNA. To overcome all of these negative emotions and break this cycle, you have to unlearn what you learned as a child.”

This inability to control the constant, destructive forces in their own home also leads children to experience a constant state of frustration and resentment. Combined with a lack of compassion – another natural response to the troubling situation – this means that as the children enter adulthood, they are completely unprepared to develop loving, supportive relationships. For many of the same reasons, rates of suicide for teenagers and young adults impacted by CDV are six times higher than for the general population, and these individuals are 50 times more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and 74 times more likely to commit a violence crime – making this a tragedy in countless ways.

Drawing Lessons from Her Own Experience

Like millions of others, Dr. Olson says that the domestic violence she witnessed as a girl led her to enter (and remain in) a marriage that replicated this destructive pattern. Research has found that growing up in a household affected by CDV is the most significant predictor that an individual will find herself or himself in an abusive relationship later in life, and/or be the perpetrator of this behavior. “All of these negative beliefs that you develop as a child become internalized, and they exert an unconscious pull on the individual,” she says. “The individual feels compelled to repeat what feels familiar, because at some level the brain thinks this is what’s right, and that this is what a ‘loving relationship’ looks like. It also provides certainty because this is what seems familiar from childhood.”

“After enduring a violent marriage for more than 22 years,” Dr. Olson says, “I finally realized the impact this was having on my sons, and that gave me the courage to leave. Thirty years ago, this life-threatening crisis was something that no one dared talk about with others, and – tragically – not much has changed over the years. Most people still think that ‘domestic violence’ refers to the physical abuse experienced by adults, most often women, and they don’t realize the damaging and lasting impact that is inflicted on children who witness this behavior, even if they aren’t touched themselves.” This turning point in her own life led Dr. Olson to find ways that she could help others affected by CDV, hoping to spare them from the pain and tragedy she has experienced.

Further fueling Dr. Olson’s commitment to making a difference in the lives of others affected by CDV is the memory of her two sisters, who both died as a result of this horrific crisis. Her sister Mary endured a series of abusive relationships and died homeless, and her sister Ann was stalked and killed by an abusive ex-boyfriend.

What Can Be Done

As a therapist, Dr. Olson works with patients ranging in age from 11 to 75, and the individuals and families who seek her help are almost always surprised to learn that not only are they not alone in facing this problem, but also that the damaging effects of CDV are well documented by research. “People say, ‘Why didn’t anybody tell me about this? I’ve been seeing a therapist for years.’ It’s because, generally speaking, therapists are not still trained in this area,” she says. “The adults who experienced the impact of CDV as children can’t understand why they feel the way they do – and until you understand that, it’s impossible to move forward. This awareness is the essential first step, prior to any healing.”

Breaking the cycle of behavior requires breaking the silence -- much as many individuals who were once the victims of sexual violence and harassment are now courageously speaking out as part of the nation’s #MeToo movement. Dr. Olson stresses that this is a key step in overcoming the damage of CDV, because so many victims have a sense of shame. “They feel that ‘nobody is going to believe me, and maybe I caused this terrible situation,’ she says. Similar to many women in an abusive relationship, they often feel ‘this must be my fault,’ and until they can overcome that feeling of shame, it’s almost impossible to break free of that toxic relationship.”

With awareness, comes education. Dr. Olson calls this “the ‘mindfulness’ step.” By labeling the behavior, and understanding it, patients can then begin healing and recovery. As director of the Georgia chapter of the national non-profit Childhood Domestic Violence Association, Dr. Olson always encourages her new patients to start the healing process by reading the book “Invincible” by CDVA’s president, Brian F. Martin. She says that it’s always a painful process for them to read about the many ways that CDV has affected the lives of millions of other people, but this lets them know that they are not alone in confronting this crisis. “I will tell you, unequivocally,” Dr. Olson says, “every patient – every mother, father, and every teenage child – says, ‘Wow! That book changed my life. It helped me to understand what nobody ever talked about. This was me. I had no idea this was so widespread!’” The fact that this is the first book to look at CDV in depth underscores just how rarely this important issue is discussed publicly.

“I especially want to educate parents about the impact of CDV,” Dr. Olson says. “When parents understand how damaging this can be on their children, that’s when they take action to break the cycle and seek help, as I

did once I learned more about CDV. When parents understand this impact, it gives them the courage to take the action necessary to get better, to heal, and to start therapy. Once they have this awareness, it's hard to deny the truth."

Dr. Olson also says that each of us can be "that good friend," the one who helps someone we know gain an understanding of the impact of CDV, if this subject ever comes up in conversation. "They can be the one person that starts talking about this important topic," she says, "and the one who talks about the solution. They can also encourage their friend to go to the CDV.org website, where they can purchase one of this non-profit organization's 'Change a Life' programs. Breaking the silence can be remarkably healing, because you literally start to break the chain, and the more you do it, the easier it gets. The hardest thing is breaking through and taking that first step."

The next step in breaking this cycle is to give oneself permission to set aside any guilt or shame that is so common for those who grew up with CDV. Dr. Olson says that, from the first session, she lets her patients know that they will not be judged. "These are people who have been judged their entire lives – and judging themselves every day of their lives, for decades. In fact, that process has become internalized for so many of my patients, often for several decades, so they aren't even aware they're doing it. One of our first steps is to help them start noticing when they are judging themselves, so they can stop doing this."

"It takes courage to start sharing their story," she continues. "I let them know that it's not their fault. There's no way a person can grow up exposed to CDV and not feel self-conscious about themselves. Once I let them know that the situation is not their fault, and that I will not be judging them, the healing can begin and it then becomes their responsibility to break the cycle," she says. "And together, that's exactly what we do. As a therapist, I practice a non-judgmental self-awareness of thoughts, feelings and urges. I encourage 'mindfulness' every day. My patients now have a responsibility to do better, to break the cycle – and that takes a lot of commitment, and support, and love."

As Dr. Olson takes her patients through a number of educational lessons, teaching them tools such as emotional regulation, stress tolerance and inner personal effectiveness, she encourages them to think of her as "their coach." And just like any strenuous exercise program, those first few trips to the gym can be painful. Over time, however, progress can be very satisfying. "We can get to a point when our work together is actually fun," she says. "It's a great feeling to see people grow and heal. It's transformative. I tell them that 'I can't do it for you – and you don't have to do it alone! Simply knowing, perhaps for the first time in decades, that they are no longer alone can be quite emotional for most of my patients."

Often Dr. Olson's patients seem to feel as if they may not be "justified" in noting the impact that CDV has had on their lives. "They often say, 'Oh, I wasn't hit,' or 'I wasn't sexually abused.' They were, however, watching one parent physically attacking the other, and living in a state of fear every single day. The fact is that CDV has affected them on a deep level," she says.

"I love teaching my patients the skills and tools that can undo this years of damage," she says, and makes use of what she describes as "evidence-based, trauma-informed treatment, which she has found to be very effective in treating CDV." In addition, Dr. Olson takes her patients through a process called "Dialectical Behavior Therapy" (DBT) which gives them the skills and tools they need to recover from the emotional damage caused by CDV. She also participates in a pilot program launched by the national CDVA organization, by introducing her patients to a new app titled "Courage Unleashed" that takes them through a 45-day educational program. This is a program that can benefit every individual seeking to heal from CDV, even those who are not working with a therapist.

If there is any "silver lining" – or at least a reason for hope – in the challenging fight against CDV, it may be the fact that the healing process can be tremendously empowering. In fact, studies have found that people who experience fear and adversity in life can actually achieve a higher level of happiness and peace than others who may have experienced intense challenges, a process referred to as "post-traumatic growth."

Dr. Olson says she feels a tremendous sense of fulfillment when she sees her patients making progress. "It feels so good to give them hope," she says. "As a therapist, that's the most important thing. You want to give patients and families hope, because without hope we have nothing."

The “Project Hope Bear”

“Show You Care, Give a Bear!”

Having worked with hundreds of children whose young lives have been touched by violence and/or lost a loved one – and drawing on the painful memories of her own experience with childhood domestic violence, as well as the loss of her two beloved sisters later in life – Dr. Linda Olson has begun laying the groundwork for a community dedicated to making a difference in the lives of these vulnerable boys and girls.

Through a crowdfunding campaign to be launched later this month, Dr. Olson’s goal is to create a community that will come together to bring the “Project Hope Bear” to children throughout the US. This community will collectively:

- Provide comfort to children who have lost a loved one to violence or witnessed violence
- Raise awareness about the widespread threat of Childhood Domestic Violence (CDV) to children in the US and throughout the world
- Provide a free “Project Hope Bear” to all children who have lost a loved one to violence or have witnessed violence, to help with the grieving process
- Take action to let these children know that we, too, grieve the loss of their parent or loved one, letting these young boys and girls know that they are not alone

“I’m so excited about the ‘Project Hope Bear’ community,” Dr. Olson says, “because I know, with absolute certainty, that this will make a difference in the lives of so many children!”

For Dr. Linda Olson, it has been a long – and often painful – journey, but her excitement and optimism as she prepares to launch the “Project Hope Bear” community is inescapable. “For a little girl, who grew up never knowing what to do, or how to make a difference, finding that I can help others rise above the pain and suffering that they’ve experienced due to CDV is an amazing feeling! This has been transformative for me. I’m so excited! I now know the answers, and I know what’s going to help people. I really feel like I’m being led to do this work. I’m healing myself and I’m healing others!”

In closing, she quotes the religious philosopher and writer Richard Rohr, who once said, “If we don’t transform our pain, we will most assuredly transform it onto others.” Dr. Olson concludes, “I’m determined that I am not going to repeat it. I am going to do whatever it takes to break this cycle in my family – and in our culture.”

About Linda Olson, Psy.D

Dr. Linda Olson is a licensed Psychologist and Psychotherapist, as well as a victim advocate, with over 30 years in private practice specializing in domestic violence, abuse, and trauma. Dr. Olson has a dual Masters in Clinical Social Work and Clinical Psychology from the University of Iowa and a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the Georgia School of Professional Psychology, Argosy University in Atlanta. Her postdoctoral work has focused on developing treatment programs to those who experience Childhood Domestic Violence (CDV) and struggle with its impact. Dr. Olson is a Board Member of the Childhood Domestic Violence Association and is the Chapter Founder and President of the Association’s Georgia Chapter. She has dedicated her life to raising awareness of Childhood Domestic Violence (CDV) and helping deliver the solutions to those affected, in memory of her two sisters, who she believes lost their lives because they were unable to overcome that impact. Growing up with CDV herself, Linda has a personal understanding of the profound feelings of loss, hopelessness and feeling alone that are associated with childhood trauma, and has experienced firsthand the cycle of violence, fear and uncertainty that ALL too often persists for those who have had such experiences.

For more information about Dr. Linda Olson, visit
www.drlindaolson.com

For additional information about Childhood Domestic Violence (CDV), visit:
www.CDV.org

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