

Inspired by *An Act of Service*  
The award-winning documentary featured in **The New York Times**

# BRAVE



**RISE STRONGER AFTER  
LIFE'S HARDEST MOMENTS**

**ROB Z CHRISTENSEN**

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*Rise Stronger After Life's Hardest Moments*

**Rob Z. Christensen**

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE ON PRIVACY AND SOURCES**

I have shared the real names of most individuals whose personal stories appear in this book, with their express permission. As you'll learn throughout the pages ahead—authenticity and vulnerability matter. To me. To them. To you.

I have changed some names and identifying details when asked to do so, or when these stories could reveal the personal experiences of individuals who are unable to provide me with their explicit authorization.

For all first-hand accounts, the events I have described reflect my own perspective and memory. Others may recall events differently.

Other second- and third-hand case studies included in the book are gratefully borrowed.

The insight of other thought-leaders is cited when appropriate.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE CALL THAT SAVED A LIFE

Easter Sunday, 2024. Robie Creek, Idaho.

I'd been two hours deep in the Idaho mountains with my wife, Valerie—far enough from civilization that cell service was just a memory. We were decompressing, disconnecting, letting the silence of the wilderness reset our souls.

When we finally got back within range, my cell phone lit up like a Christmas tree. Missed calls from Jon—a fellow firefighter, and one of my closest friends. Missed calls from his wife. Text messages that stopped me in my tracks: "Rob, we need your help. *Please call.*"

I called Jon's number. His wife answered on the first ring.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Jon needs some serious help," she said. "He needs to be admitted into crisis therapy. He's struggling—having thoughts about ending it all."

Then she said something that would alter Jon's path, and mine, forever: "Rob, Jon wants to talk to you. He says you saved his life."

When Jon got on the phone, his voice was different—raw, broken open, but somehow clearer than I'd heard it in years.

"Dude, you saved my life," he said.

"What do you mean? How?" I asked.

What Jon told me next convinced me that vulnerability is a superpower.

## How a Documentary Reached the Unreachable

Jon was a 20-year paramedic and 13-year firefighter who had turned chaos into a coping mechanism. While most people seek peace after repeated hardships, Jon sought more adrenaline. Extreme sports. Third-world motorcycle expeditions. Dangerous adventures that challenged his very existence.

For years, this M.O. worked. The bigger the risk, the quieter Jon's inner demons became. But eventually, even the most extreme adventures stopped providing relief. Jon found himself entirely broken, with nowhere left to run.

That Easter morning, while his wife was out running errands, Jon decided to watch the final cut of *An Act of Service*—a documentary about my journey through trauma and healing that would soon get a write-up in the *New York Times*. He'd seen it before, but this time was different. This time, he was watching it through the lens of a man who was ready to give up.

For hours, Jon sat at his kitchen table, video on replay. Watching me be vulnerable on screen in ways that reached something deep within him, territory that even our extremely tight friendship hadn't touched. The film captured me in my most unguarded moments—processing decades of trauma, through integrative therapies that weren't exactly the norm in our fire service culture. Being honest about my pain in ways that gave Jon permission to access his own.

When Jon's wife came home, she found him where she'd left him in the kitchen, now weeping uncontrollably. For the first time in his life, he couldn't adrenaline his way out of what was going on inside.

"I completely broke down," Jon told me the next day. "My wife found me at the table bawling when she got home. I cried for hours. All I could utter between sobs was, 'Please call Rob, please call Rob.'"

That's when the truth had come pouring out. Not just the thoughts about ending his life, but the deeper trauma that had been driving every addiction, every depression, every dangerous escape attempt he'd ever made.

And for the first time, Jon said the words that would save his life: "I need help. I can't do this alone anymore."

## What I Learned in the Breaking

When I made the decision to unmask my trauma in *An Act of Service*—and in the follow-up feature film *Under Fire*—I told myself it would be worth the risk, if it helped even one person. I was prepared for judgment, criticism, or worse—complete indifference.

But I never imagined getting proof that this emotional gamble would reap a real-life return—and in such a personal way—before the documentary was even screened for a live audience.

Here was powerful validation that being open creates ripple effects you can't predict or control. My willingness to be seen in my broken—and healing—moments had given Jon permission to revisit and explore his own trauma that had been buried for decades.

"I don't think I could have made that call without seeing somebody I love and admire be so vulnerable himself," Jon would later reflect.

Within 24 hours of that initial call for help, Jon was on a flight to the First Responder Wellness Center in Newport Beach, California. For 60 days, he dove deep. He faced the childhood trauma he'd spent decades burying.

He learned techniques to reset his nervous system, like somatic exercises, breathwork, and journaling—tools that he still uses today. He approached his psychological healing with the same intensity he'd channeled into pushing his physical limits.

Most importantly, he learned to extend himself the same empathy he'd always given others.

The Jon who returned after 60 days wasn't just better—he was *changed*. The work he'd done hadn't just quieted his suicidal thoughts. It had fundamentally altered how he related to himself, and everyone around him.

Today, Jon is living life to its fullest extent—not because it got easier, but because he developed the tools to handle whatever it throws at him. He now speaks openly about his journey, wanting his story to be a beacon of hope for others who are struggling in silence.

## **Why I Had to Write This**

The insight that was captured on film in *An Act of Service*, and helped to save Jon's life, came from specialized resilience training even most first responders don't have access to—but which I'm grateful to have had. Peer support programs, trauma-informed therapies, mindfulness retreats. These resources shouldn't require time on the job with a forward-thinking fire department or a \$20,000 personal wellness budget to obtain.

They should be as accessible as the book in your hands.

That's why BRAVE exists. Not as theory, but as tested practice. The framework in this book—the perspective shifts, the practices, the tools—these are the same ones that saved my career, strengthened my marriage, and have now helped Jon to restore his life.

You shouldn't need privilege to learn how to properly care for yourself. You just need this book and the courage to use what's in it.

## **The Crisis Hiding in Plain Sight**

Throughout my career, I've logged a number of “grabs”—a firefighter term for the dramatic rescues that draw many of us to this work. I've pulled a crash victim from a fiery car, rescued occupants trapped in burning houses, retrieved an unconscious man from a van submerged in a canal, and resuscitated people with no heartbeat.

But I've made far more grabs between 911 calls than on them—in quiet moments when fellow first responders confided that their lives were at risk, not from performing dramatic rescues, but from the trauma they've concealed for years. Throughout my career, I've worked to rescue more people inside the profession than outside of it—from divorce, from addiction, from suicidal thoughts.

The crisis isn't just in firehouses, police stations, and ambulance bays. It's everywhere people are taught that strength means silence.

And it's killing us.

The people we look to for strength—caregivers, public safety officials, leaders—are struggling at unprecedented levels. They're performing strength while crumbling inside. They're burning out faster than they can be replaced. And in frontline professions like mine, they're dying by suicide, at alarming rates.

But here's what Jon's recovery taught me: One person's courage to be real can save someone else's life.

## **The Day I Broke**

For years, I'd carried everyone else's pain—personally and professionally. I was the one who stayed calm in crisis. The one who always had the answers. I thought I was unbreakable.

Until the day I wasn't.

It was supposed to be a routine call—the kind of medical crisis I'd handled hundreds of times in my career as a firefighter. An elderly man. Cardiac arrest. CPR in progress.

But something went wrong. Not with the attempted resuscitation—with me.

As I stood next to the ailing man's wife, watching my captain perform the standard chest compressions, something inside me snapped. Not broke—*snapped*. Like a circuit breaker thrown by an overload I couldn't name.

For the first time in my career, I couldn't answer the call. I froze, speechless.

But what I didn't understand then was that this moment—this short-circuit I was so ashamed of—wasn't the beginning of a breakdown. It was the beginning of my breakthrough.

Because sometimes you have to fall apart completely before you can put yourself back together.

## **What BRAVE Really Is**

BRAVE isn't a self-help book that promises easy answers or quick fixes. Life is hard, people struggle, and there are no shortcuts to personal growth.

This *is* the story of how a 10-year-old boy too traumatized to answer a ringing phone grew up to be an emergency responder who learned he could save lives by being real. It's about discovering that the very things you've been hiding—your struggles, your imperfections, your humanity—are actually your greatest sources of strength and connection.

The framework you're about to discover emerged from real life. It has been tested in the crucible of crisis, refined through years of peer support work, and validated by people like Jon, who chose growth over giving up.

## **Who This Book Is For**

Maybe you picked up this book because you're tired of limping through your life, instead of really living it. Because you're leading others, but struggling to lead yourself. Because you want to love and be loved without condition, but don't know how.

Because you're ready to stop carrying the weight alone.

This book is for anyone who's ever felt like they were drowning, while everyone else assumed they were gliding along the surface. It's for those ready to trade performance for presence, image for impact, and survival for thriving.

You don't need to be a first responder to deserve these tools. You just need to be human.

## **The BRAVE Promise**

There are no shortcuts to healing, no hacks for genuine growth. But here's what I can promise:

*If you're willing to be real instead of right, vulnerable instead of perfect—your life will change.*

Not overnight. Not without effort. But fundamentally, powerfully, permanently.

You'll sleep better because you're not carrying the weight of pretense. You'll connect deeper because people trust authenticity more than perfection. You'll lead

more effectively because you'll create psychological safety for truth-telling. You'll love more fully because you'll finally know how to love yourself.

And perhaps most importantly: Your courage to be real will give others permission to do the same.

That's how Jon's life was restored. That's how change happens. That's why this matters.

## **Your Invitation**

Every journey begins with a decision. The path back to yourself does, too.

The decision to stop hiding and start healing. The decision to stop coasting and start living. The decision to stop pretending and start being.

I'm inviting you to choose yourself, battle scars and all.

The world is waiting for who you really are.

Not the person you think you should be. Not the person others expect you to be. The person you actually are—imperfect, struggling, growing, real.

That person? That person is enough. That person is needed. That person is BRAVE.



# PART ONE

## THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

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“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

– *Carl Jung*

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Before you can heal, you need to understand what you're healing from. Before you can grow, you need to know where you're currently rooted.

BRAVE, Part One is about **looking inward**—understanding trauma, building internal courage, adapting to challenges, and learning to show up as your authentic self.

These chapters are about **you**—your nervous system, your story, your relationship with yourself. This is where the difficult internal work happens. This is where you learn to love yourself, first.

Once you've built that foundation, you'll be ready to bring BRAVE into your relationships, your leadership, and the world around you.

But first? You start here. With you.



## *Chapter 1*

# **YOU'VE BEEN CARRYING MORE THAN YOU KNOW**

### **A New Way to Understand Your Pain & Reclaim Your Power**

Let me start with something many people never hear, but desperately need to: You may be carrying trauma—and not even know it.

Picture this: You're sitting in a meeting, and your boss asks you a direct question. Something that matters. Something you know the answer to. But when you open your mouth to speak, nothing comes out. Your throat closes. Your mind goes blank. Everyone's looking at you, and you're drowning in plain sight.

Or maybe it's less dramatic than that. You're standing in your kitchen, and the sound of a harmless metal spoon slipping off the counter and crashing to the floor launches you halfway to the ceiling.

If you've ever been sent into fight or flight by moments that shouldn't rattle you, keep reading.

You might not call it trauma. You might call it stress, burnout, overthinking, or just feeling "off." You might think you're the problem. That you're too emotional. Or not emotional enough. That you need to be tougher. Better. More.

But what if it's not about being weak or somehow incomplete? What if your nervous system is simply exhausted from carrying things it never had help to set back down?

If you've ever felt like you're hauling an invisible, unnamable burden, consider this your wake-up call—and your invitation. To see yourself clearly. To name what hurts. To stop minimizing what you've lived through.

And to discover what it takes to finally feel whole again.

## **The T Word**

Trauma. Two syllables that have become like that one-hit song on the radio—played so often, you can't hear the lyrics anymore. At first, it meant something. Now, it just blends in with the background noise.

Let's be honest—trauma has been overplayed, labeled onto everything from bad Mondays to casual breakups. But not every discomfort is "traumatic." And not every stressor means you have an anxiety disorder.

There's a difference between a paper cut and a stab wound, between a tough chapter in your life and a clinical condition. When we classify every speed bump as a breakdown, we blur the line—and risk building our identity around a surface wound that doesn't have to define us.

This isn't about gatekeeping trauma. It's about protecting its meaning.

When we overuse a word, we strip it of its weight. Real trauma deserves a more respectful, genuine response than casual overuse. When we start calling every challenge a "trauma," we water down the experiences of everyone still learning how to live with the real thing.

As a career firefighter, I've experienced, and witnessed, the types of traumatic events that make the headlines—and I know that many BRAVE readers have, too. I've felt the sting of divorce, of losing loved ones, of being a target of violence. I've also felt the slowly crushing weight of quieter stressors stacking, one on top of the other, until I reached my breaking point. And that's real trauma, too.

Not every paper cut needs a surgeon. But the deeply carved wounds do.

## **What Trauma Really Is—and What It Isn't**

Trauma isn't about minor discomfort—short-term stress, temporary "overwhelm," rough patches. It's about psychological injury so complete that your body and nervous system can't find their way back to safety without support.

While the over-hype has helped reduce trauma's stigma, it's also created confusion. Not every trying experience qualifies as trauma in the clinical sense. Failing a test or bombing an interview, having a frustrating encounter or a confrontation, being mildly offended or aggravated—these are life's inevitable skinned knees, not head wounds.

So what is trauma?

Dr. Gabor Maté, renowned physician and author of *When the Body Says No*, suggests trauma isn't just what happened to you. It's what happens inside of you because of what happened to you—especially when you didn't feel safe, seen, or supported at the time.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, puts it even more directly: "Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then. It's the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people."

Trauma isn't the external event. It's the internal injury—your body bracing long after the danger has passed. It's not about the surface, but what's etched much deeper. It's what gets disrupted inside of you—your sense of security, worth, or connection.

Real trauma hijacks your nervous system. It rewires how you experience safety, trust, and emotion. It's not just hard—it's haunting.

It's why loud noises make you flinch, why you shrink from difficult conversations, why you feel numb when you should feel fully alive. It disconnects you from yourself and your voice.

Here's what science tells us: When trauma hits, your amygdala—your brain's alarm system—gets stuck in overdrive. Unprocessed trauma actually rewires your neural pathways, keeping you in a state of hypervigilance long after the danger has passed.

It's not about being broken. It's about biology. Your nervous system learned to protect you, and now it doesn't know how to stand down.

Hardship	Trauma
Difficult, but manageable	Overwhelms your sense of safety or identity
Leaves you tired or frustrated	Leaves you numb, triggered, hypervigilant, or shut down
May strengthen coping skills	May lead to disconnection or exaggerated self-protection
Doesn't alter your core beliefs	Can alter how you see the world—or yourself
Resolves with time or support	Leaves a lasting imprint on your nervous system

Real trauma leaves a mark—sometimes visible, but more often invisible. It lingers in the background, altering how you view the world, relationships, and even yourself. And while everyone experiences adversity, not all adversity becomes trauma. What turns hardship into trauma is the absence of adequate support and the tools to process what happened.

Two people can experience the same event. One moves on. The other breaks down. Why? Because trauma isn't only about the event—it's about the meaning the event carries and the condition of the individual nervous system that absorbs it.

If you've ever looked back and thought, "Why did that mess me up more than it should have?"—you're not helpless. You're human.

Strong reactions aren't weakness. They're wisdom—signals that let you know you've hit a trigger point, reached a limit. And chances are, there's more going on beneath the surface than you ever gave yourself credit for.

Most people carrying deeply embedded trauma don't realize they're living with it—because they've grown so used to the armor they wear to survive.

### **Distress Signals: Trauma's Traces**

Trauma doesn't just leave you with intrusive memories or haunting flashbacks. It leaves you with other remnants—psychological, emotional, mental, and behavioral residue that signals trauma has embedded itself in your being. Some of us get so used to hauling our trauma, to wearing our defensive shields, that we don't even notice the symptoms.

## Trauma's Thumbprints

Emotional Dysregulation	Overwhelming or unmanageable feelings of depression, fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, or other emotions
Hypervigilance or Hyperarousal	Feeling easily startled or “on the edge”; constantly scanning for danger
Emotional Numbing, Detachment, or Dissociation	Feeling detached from yourself or others; feeling “shut down” or removed from reality
Avoidance or Escape	Intentionally avoiding people, places, situations, or thoughts that remind you of traumatic experiences; the use of substances to leave your reality behind
Negative Self-Perception or Low Self-Confidence	Believing that you are unworthy or incapable
Cognitive Difficulties	Experiencing challenges concentrating or remembering; feeling confused or mentally “comatose”
Relationship Issues	Difficulty trusting others or forming and maintaining relationships; self-isolating from friends and family
Perfectionism and People Pleasing	Believing that imperfection, failure, or disappointing others will risk your safety

Maybe you see yourself in the inventory above. You recognize trauma by its calling cards.

Or, maybe you're now realizing that the hardships you've experienced, while jarring, may not be trauma in the truest sense. Maybe you could still use some support to navigate life's hurdles. Even if you don't need intensive therapy or a clinical deep-dive, you might need a reset. Time to regroup. New tools to steady yourself before too many paper cuts carve a deeper wound.

If you have waded through deep waters and you're looking for a way forward that doesn't rely on masking, performing, or suppressing—keep reading.

In either case, this book was written for you.

## **The Backpack**

Think of unprocessed trauma as carrying rocks in a backpack.

Every difficult moment, every painful memory, every time you're told to "suck it up" or "just get over it"—each fresh wound becomes a pebble, a stone, a block of granite.

At first, you may hardly notice. You strap the backpack on and keep moving. You adapt to the weight.

But over time, the load gets heavier. More rocks get dropped in: a betrayal, a failure, a moment you couldn't speak your truth, a loss you never grieved. The straps begin to dig into your shoulders. The climb gets harder. And one day—without warning—your knees buckle.

Not because you're weak. Because no one ever taught you how to take the rocks out.

Most of us learn to carry, not to unpack. We normalize the pain, adapt to the discomfort, and push through. That works—until it doesn't. Until one more rock—even a fragment—tips the balance and we shut down, blow up, or go numb. Then we wonder: *Why did that hit me so hard?*

## **Allostatic Load: The “Stacking Effect” is Real**

Allostatic load refers to the cumulative wear and tear on your mind and body caused by chronic stress. It's what happens when your nervous system never gets to return to baseline—when the “fight, flight, or freeze” response stays activated, long after the danger is gone.

Unlike acute stress, which spikes and then recedes, allostatic load builds over time. It's your body adapting to a constant state of alertness, frequent adrenaline surges, fragmented sleep, incomplete recovery, and emotional exhaustion.

For frontline professionals—those of us in high-stakes roles where lives are constantly on the line—this “stacking effect” can result from shift work, repeated exposure to trauma, hypervigilance, and the emotional labor of holding space for others, without time or “permission” to process our own pain.

For those fighting on their own less-public front lines—from teachers to corporate executives—the emotional injury may stem from unrelenting workplace stressors, repeated family emergencies, or back-to-back life crises.

Over time, this load can affect your physical health—elevating your blood pressure, spiking your inflammation levels, and aggravating digestive issues. And it can affect your mental health—lowering you into anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional numbing. Under constant pressure, the body starts to treat everything like a potential threat—until eventually, a grain of sand lands like a boulder.

### **1.1 READER REFLECTION**

#### **What have I been hauling?**

Take a quiet pause and ask yourself:

- Have I ever minimized something deeply distressing by saying, “It wasn't that bad,” even though it still lives in my mind or body?
- Have I ever brushed off something that hit deep—not because it wasn't real, but because I thought I should be able to keep it together?

- Have I ever experienced something that seemed trivial to others, but left me feeling disconnected, numb, or afraid?
- Have I been carrying a silent burden I never gave myself permission to acknowledge?

You don't need to justify your pain to anyone. If it hurt you—and it changed you—it's real, and it's worth reexamining.

As you journey through BRAVE, allow yourself a time-out any time you feel triggered. If you need to, refer to the *Crisis Resources* outlined in the **Disclaimer**, or the exercises introduced in the **Reset Toolkit** that follows the Epilogue.

We're on a healing mission—safety first.

## **From Carrying to Catching**

The BRAVE framework is designed to help you reset, so your nervous system can finally start to feel safe again—and a piece of gravel doesn't break your back.

Here's what changed my life—and why I wrote this book: I didn't just learn how to empty the backpack—to unpack the contents and give them healthy consideration. I learned how to stop that pack from filling in the first place. I built tools that rewired my brain, softened my automatic reactions, and helped me process pain before it hardened into pressure.

Life didn't stop throwing rocks my way—it's still hurling them. But now I see them coming. I catch them. I acknowledge them. And if one slips into my pack, I don't ignore it. I make space, slow down, and decide: *Do I need to carry this? Or can I let it go?* I address it with intention, before it settles in.

This approach—which you'll learn through the BRAVE framework—gives you a way to carry less, live lighter, and heal faster.

## **The Freeze: Trapped Beyond Fight or Flight**

Summer, 1979. Pleasanton, California.

I was 10 years old, barefoot on the scratchy, faded shag carpet of our living room. The tan curtains hung limp at the windows, filtering in tired yellow light. The air

felt thick—not just with heat, but with charged stillness. The kind that warns you: *Something might happen.*

The house pulsed with tension. Not peaceful energy, but the hum of breath held. Like the walls themselves were bracing for the next slammed door. The next insult. The next echoing, heavy silence.

Then the phone rang.

The phone—mounted to the kitchen wall—was a mustard-colored relic with a long, stretched-out cord knotted from years of nervous fingers. It had two settings: loud and louder. When it rang, it didn't ask permission. It demanded attention.

Rrrrrring. Rrrrrring. *Rrrrrriiiiiiiiiing.*

No caller ID. No voicemail. Just a sound that said, "Something's coming... and you don't get to know what."

I was alone. Completely alone in that house. No older brother or adult to ask, "Should I answer that?" No one to protect me from whatever—or whoever—was on the other end. No one to lean on if it was bad news.

I didn't move. My feet stayed glued to the carpet. My arms hung limp. My throat tightened like I had swallowed pure, unpasteurized fear and couldn't spit it back out.

I knew what I was supposed to do. Walk over. Pick up the receiver. Say something simple like "Hello."

But I couldn't. I froze. *Hard.*

I was paralyzed—motionless and speechless. If my life depended on it, I couldn't move—let alone inch close enough to the dingy yellow handset to pick it up and try to speak.

It wasn't until I started getting BRAVE on paper that I learned there's a term for what happened to 10-year-old Robbie that day. That the paralysis was real—physical, not just psychological.

But I knew enough then to sense it wasn't the phone I was afraid of. It was everything that was coiled around it.

## **The Boulders in My Kid-Sized Backpack**

I'd had some sizable rocks stuffed into my pack. My parents had recently split, fracturing our family and my young life. The house—either empty or chaotic—no longer felt like a home. It was just a hollow structure now. If it had a heartbeat, it rhythmically belted out fear. The warmth, the laughter, the sense of belonging had all vaporized.

Our modest house on Klamath Court still looked normal enough from the outside—it had walls, windows, and doors. But like my sense of safety, the front doors never quite latched. During windstorms, they'd fly open without warning—slamming against walls or letting in a chill, spiking my nervous system to high alert.

Worse than the unlatched doors was what lived inside them. Larry, my mom's rebound boyfriend, a hollow man whose presence somehow filled a room before he stepped inside. Most days, I'd start looking for an excuse to disappear the minute I heard the throaty growl of his old Mustang in the driveway.

Larry was tall and slick, hair shellacked straight back, cologne hitting you like a wall. Outside the house, he could charm anyone. Inside, he was a second-rate bully. His deep voice boomed through walls, through rib cages. He strutted down the hallway in a robe every morning, and I prayed he had underwear on. He yelled, he threw things, he left holes in the drywall like rage-signatures. I never heard my dad raise his voice the way Larry did.

Oddly enough, the safest version of Larry came after he smoked some weed in the back bedroom. "Pot Larry" returned calmer, even cracked a joke. If I had a choice—and I didn't—I'd take stoned Larry over sober Larry, every time.

Larry was an ever-present threat, but fear wasn't contained within our walls, didn't stop at our unhinged front door.

That same summer, Skylab became a household name—and not in a good way. Skylab was America's first space station, launched by NASA in the early '70s.

After completing its mission orbiting Earth, the 85,000-ton hunk of metal was supposed to quietly dissolve into space. But things didn't go as planned. Instead, Skylab began a slow, uncontrolled descent toward Earth—and not even space command knew where it might land.

We didn't have internet. We didn't have phones in our pockets. We had three TV channels and the radio—and all the talk was about Skylab. Commentators swarmed the news, explaining the physics, the odds, the probability of the space station crashing into the ocean. But I was 10 years old. I didn't understand odds. All I heard was: It's falling. And it might hit *us*.

I'd walk outside and look up at the sky—not in wonder, but in fear. I imagined that stray satellite punching through the clouds and smashing right through our roof.

If wayward space junk wasn't enough to erode my sense of security, there was Santa Rita Jail—an expanse of concrete and steel larger than many state prisons. Overcrowded, tense, and filled with suspects waiting for trial—some dangerous, some forgotten, some both. It loomed a short mile and a half from our house, as the convict runs.

When the escape sirens blared, we locked the doors as best we could and wondered if tonight was the night someone sinister, prowling for a hiding place, would find us. Santa Rita cast a shadow I couldn't name, but could feel.

And when the wind kicked up and our doors blew open again, I imagined the worst. Home alone, my mind filled in the gaps: an escapee, a break-in, a mass murderer coming straight toward our broken, unguarded home.

Even on calmer days, Santa Rita haunted me in subtler ways. Any time we drove to the next town over, especially on weekends, we'd pass a line of cars stretching down the road, the occupants waiting for visitation hours to begin. The cars were as dismal as Santa Rita's exterior—run-down, paint fading, hoods dented, tires bald. Families stood outside, killing time. I remember kids climbing on top of cars—hood to rooftop to trunk and back again—like makeshift playgrounds made from impatience and desperation.

I'd been around enough to know this dejecting scene was not the norm, not how my friends and classmates spent their weekend mornings. It left an impression that never really faded. Even as a kid, I sensed that the mega-jail didn't just hold inmates—it held their families hostage, too. And it was right there, with only a freeway and a weed-laced field between its barbed wire fence and where we slept.

Rounding out my trifecta of fear, the ground itself couldn't be trusted. It was unsettled—like my whole life had become. The Bay Area had been hit with a string of small earthquakes that would rumble on for five years. Not strong enough to top the Richter scale, but enough to jolt a 10-year-old nervous system. A window rattling here, a cabinet swinging there. Sometimes the tremor was over before I could react. Other times, I'd sit frozen, waiting to see if this was it—the Big One we learned to brace for in school. The Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 was seared into our textbooks, and our imagination. The message was clear: It could happen again, at any time.

Although falling short of making it into the history books, the minor quakes had been enough to misalign the main doors to our house—the ones that now blew open in the wind, leaving the place perpetually unlatched, literally and figuratively.

I still remember one night when my desertion became all too clear. The wind howled hard enough to shake our walls, and then—*bang*—the garage door blew open. I panicked, thinking someone was in the house. I called my mom, down at Larry's laundromat on her nightly rounds, helping him clean his machines. Within a moment, she'd called one of our neighbors, barely an adult himself. Kenny came running over gripping a baseball bat, breathless and ready to defend the neighbor kid.

But there was no intruder. Just another storm.

That's what it had come to—relying on a twenty-something with a bat because I didn't feel protected in my own home.

Eventually, I got tired of being scared. One day, armed with nothing but a hammer and a screwdriver, I took the latch bracket off, chipped out a bigger hole in the doorframe, and reset it so the latch would catch clean. Maybe I was 10 years old—but for once, I wasn't helpless.

That was a big win. A moment of control in a house where I rarely felt any. Those doors weren't going to blow open anymore. They were going to lock out the fear, like they should.

Even so, that night taught me something I didn't yet have words for: I was on my own. The house didn't offer shelter. It didn't offer peace. It offered survival—and just barely. I'd have to keep my guard up.

Even when things were calm, they never really felt calm. The sky might be clear, the ground might be still, but my body didn't believe it. That's the hidden cost of growing up under chronic stress. You don't get to live at baseline. You're always bracing, always scanning, always wondering what's next.

That kind of constant vigilance changes a kid. It trains your young body to stay tense. To listen for danger. To expect the worst, even when nothing's happening. Trauma doesn't need a dramatic climax. Sometimes, it's just the absence of safety, over and over and over again, until your nervous system doesn't know how to relax anymore.

My unbearable backpack wasn't the result of one single, blockbuster trauma. It was the cumulative weight of many—an allostatic load that kept stacking, pressing down on my ability to feel safe, breathe easy, trust the moment.

This is often how the nervous system gets injured and learns to survive. Not always in crashing waves—but in relentless smaller currents, continuous ripples of un-ease.

I wasn't safe at home. I wasn't safe outside. I wasn't safe inside my own skin.

And I didn't know how much the invisible weight I was carrying was crushing me—until a ringing phone became a thundering wake-up call.

## **One Moment Can Change Everything**

What I didn't understand then—what most of us are never taught—is that this kind of emotional stacking is trauma. Not always loud. Not necessarily violent. But deeply scarring.

Trauma doesn't come just from car crashes, war zones, or physical battering. It also comes from being overlooked, unprotected, or uncertain for too long. And that's the part so many of us miss.

More than 45 years later, I can still feel the shag carpet under my feet and hear that phone echoing. It was one of the first times I remember shutting down completely. No tears. No tantrum. Just a quiet, invisible collapse inside myself.

For years, I wondered why one afternoon would define how I responded to stress for decades.

Science finally gave me the answer: One-trial learning.

Unlike learning music or math—which requires repetition—the body's “fear system” is designed for rapid education. One burn. One betrayal. One moment of terror. That's all it takes to wire in a protective response that can last a lifetime.

Dr. Joseph LeDoux's research at NYU suggests this evolutionary feature kept our ancestors alive. If you encountered a saber-toothed tiger, you didn't need two more exposures to learn “big cats equal danger.” You learned this immediately—or you didn't survive to learn anything else.

Here's what this means: You're not weak because a single incident changed how you respond to the world. Your nervous system did exactly what evolution designed it to: learn fast, protect always.

The asymmetry is striking. We need hundreds of hours to learn a foreign language. We need only one bad experience to develop a fear that lasts for years.

But here's the hopeful side of that truth: If your brain is powerful enough to wire something in that quickly, it's powerful enough to wire in something different. It just needs the right conditions—and that's what the BRAVE framework is designed to provide.

At 10 years old, I didn't have a single tool to make sense of what was happening around me—or to me. No trauma vocabulary, no one gently whispering, “You're scared, not broken.”

I didn't know how to breathe through the fear. I didn't know how to validate the sadness. I didn't know how to talk to myself with compassion.

I didn't know how to ask for help.

Those are the practices I've spent the last decade learning—and am now committed to teaching. Tools you'll discover in the pages ahead, inside the BRAVE framework.

Back then, I didn't have BRAVE. But I do now.

And by the end of this book—you will, too.

## **You're Not Broken. You're Adapted.**

Trauma represents nervous system overload—not a character flaw. It's a normal—even expected—reaction to abnormal, shocking, or deeply taxing situations.

Your mind and body did whatever was necessary to survive: Shut down. Stayed hyper-alert. Numbed out. Overworked. People-pleased.

It got you through.

But survival isn't the same as healing. The patterns that once protected you can start to trap you—keeping you guarded, disconnected, or stuck on autopilot.

## **Trauma, Replayed**

I didn't know it then, but my mid-summer deep freeze wouldn't be the last time I locked up. Nearly two decades later—three years into my firefighting career—I stalled out again, on what should have been a routine call.

It wasn't my most horrific call, not by a mile. No gory wreckage, no gunshot wounds, no bodies trapped in smoldering buildings.

Instead—a quiet home, an elderly man whose heart was failing, and a grieving wife. Tragic, yes, but all in a day's work for a trained emergency responder.

But right there, in that moment, something in my body shut down. My voice, my breath, my connection to the room—they all disappeared. Different setting. Different emotional set-up. Same paralyzing silence inside.

I wouldn't fully understand it until years later, but the phone call I couldn't answer at 10 and the emergency call I couldn't process at 28 were linked by something deeper—not by time, but by trauma. Trauma doesn't care about clocks and calendars. It lurks quietly, somewhere beneath the surface, until something feels familiar enough to bring it roaring back.

Trauma doesn't wait for a dramatic moment to break through. It doesn't announce itself with sirens. It waits for stillness—for a moment when your body finally lets its guard down. It waits until you're not expecting it, because that's when you finally feel safe enough to feel it.

If you don't understand what's happening in the moment, you might think you're failing, epically. But in reality—you're reliving past injuries. Psychological wounds you didn't know how to handle when they first cut deep, let alone guard against happening again.

Anxiety often works this way. Not in the middle of chaos—but in the middle of calm. You're stable enough for the truth to surface. Your nervous system, finally off high alert, suddenly floods with everything it's been holding back. That's why people have panic attacks in grocery stores. Or in line at the coffee shop. Or watching their kids' soccer game. It's not the terrifying moment—it's the moment the body finally thinks, *Maybe now I can let go.*

Sometimes, it's not the storm itself—it's the silence after, when your body realizes it's safe enough to finally feel the weight of what it has carried.

And that's what happened to me. It wasn't my worst moment on duty—it was the moment when my body finally said, *You're not okay. And I can't hold this for you anymore.*

Sometimes, it's the pebble that bursts the seams of the backpack, the tiny granule that finally breaks the straps.

Trauma resurfaces in many ways. And chances are, if you've read this far—you've felt it resurging, too.

## **Trauma Comes in Many Forms**

You don't have to "earn" your trauma through violence or disaster. If something overwhelmed your capacity to cope and left you feeling unsafe, unstable, unworthy, or utterly alone—that's trauma. Consider these many sources:

**Acute Trauma** — A single catastrophic event. A vehicle crash, violent assault, natural disaster, sudden loss of a loved one. The pain is sharp and immediate.

**Chronic Trauma** — Prolonged exposure to distress. Childhood neglect, family violence, systemic oppression, never-ending job stressors. The wound deepens slowly over time.

**Complex Trauma** — Repeated wounds that compound, often beginning in childhood. Growing up in an unsafe home, enduring multiple betrayals, experiencing repeated abandonments. Layer after layer of hurt.

**Medical Trauma** — Fear of losing life or limb. Life-threatening illnesses, emergency surgeries, high-risk births, severe injuries. When your body feels like a battlefield.

**Vicarious Trauma** — Witnessing or being exposed to others' suffering. Emergency responders processing accident scenes, parents hearing about their child's victimization, therapists listening to abuse disclosures. Absorbing pain that isn't originally yours.

**Moral Injury** — Events requiring actions that violate your core values. Conflicting military orders, workplace demands that compromise your ethics. When survival requires betraying yourself.

**Cumulative Micro-traumas** — Small, repeated wounds that stack up over time. The gradual erosion of safety and self-worth through chronic invalidation, dismissal, or emotional neglect. Death by a thousand paper cuts.

You don't have to figure out which box of hurt your pain falls into. If it cuts deep—it's real.

## 1.2 READER REFLECTION

### Am I constricted ... or expanding?

Maybe you've been stuffing your own trauma, for months or decades. Maybe reading this chapter is the first time you've dared to poke your head into your backpack—for a long time, or ever. It's dark in there, and the rough edges caught you by surprise.

That's not a red flag—that's a yellow light. You're ready to start unpacking, but at a pace that's healthy for you.

Take another pause to check in with yourself.

Start with a good deep breath. A real one—not the shallow kind you've been surviving on. Connect with your being—your head, your heart, your gut.

- Where in your life do you feel tight, guarded, or numb?
- Where are you holding your breath—physically or emotionally?
- What would it feel like to give yourself even one inch of expansion there?

You don't have to blow the doors wide open. You just have to make space. For breath. For feeling. For truth. That's where healing begins.

If you need to, refer to the *Crisis Resources* outlined in the **Disclaimer**, or the exercises introduced in the **Reset Toolkit** that follows the Epilogue.

### From Collapse to Expansion

Trauma tries to teach you that silence equals safety. That burying your pain signals strength and survival. That feeling the hurt will destroy you.

It's incredibly convincing.

Dr. Michael Sapiro—author of *Truth Medicine*, featured expert in both *An Act of Service* and *Under Fire*, and a close personal friend—once told me, "Trauma doesn't just affect what you think. It changes how your body moves through the world—it tightens, it hides, it shuts down."

Healing asks the opposite. It asks you to expand. To breathe again. To feel again. To trust again. To let your nervous system learn that connection is no longer dangerous.

The lie trauma tells is that ignoring it will make it disappear. But what stays buried doesn't stay quiet. It leaks—into your decisions, your relationships, your sense of self-worth.

And the only way out is straight through. Every time you choose to feel instead of freeze, share instead of shut down—you reclaim a little more of yourself.

BRAVE is designed to teach you how to expand again. To feel safe again. To come home to yourself.

## **The BRAVE Way Forward**

The BRAVE framework is your path out of survival mode. It's not a checklist. It's an intentional approach that reconnects you to yourself, and what matters.

BRAVE stands for five bold practices—mental resets and perspective shifts that turn wounds into healthy reflexes.

Bravery — Choosing action over fear

Resilience — Bouncing forward, not just back

Authenticity — Living aligned with your truth, and your true self

Vulnerability — Opening up instead of shutting down

Empathy — Meeting others, and yourself, with genuine compassion and understanding

The BRAVE elements are skills, not traits you're born with. You're about to learn how to build each one—in your own time, in your own way.

## **Why You'll Need to Be BRAVE**

Life leaves its marks. Some fade quickly enough. Others get encoded in our cells.

We think—or we let others think—some of those boulders should just roll off our backs. But all too often, they don't. We absorb them. We internalize them.

Over time, we get seduced by our own pain. We get comfortable in our suffering. Not because it's healthy—but because it's familiar.

Healing is uncomfortable. Growth is unfamiliar. Our minds are wired to avoid discomfort. But coming home to yourself requires courage. It takes BRAVE-ry to show yourself kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. To be honest about what you feel and what you need. To rewire your brain to stop defaulting to fear, shame, and self-rejection.

You can grow beyond trauma. This book, and the BRAVE framework, will show you how to choose resilience, step by step.

## What BRAVE Can Change

The BRAVE framework isn't just a philosophy. It requires consistent practice. A shift in how you feel, respond, lead, and live. Here's what the **Brave Mindshift** can look like in everyday life:

Before BRAVE	After BRAVE
Avoiding difficult conversations	Initiating honest dialogue
Freezing or shutting down under pressure	Pausing, breathing, and responding with clarity
Saying “yes” to please others	Saying “no” to protect your peace
Hiding your feelings to appear strong	Sharing your truth, with courage
Judging yourself for struggling	Meeting yourself with empathy and curiosity
Believing healing is weakness	Understanding healing is strength
Feeling alone in your pain	Letting others in, and accepting their support

You're not just surviving. You're choosing to live BRAVE. Starting now.

## **I Wrote this Book for You**

I've responded to gut-wrenching emergencies made for the silver screen. I've been burned, electrocuted, and had ceilings collapse on me. I've put my life on the line, day after day, never knowing what hazards each new shift would bring.

But you don't need to be a firefighter to feel burned out. You don't need to be a soldier to feel battle-worn. You don't need a diagnosis to feel dis-ease.

This book isn't just for those who chose a high-octane career like mine—first responders, emergency room workers, people in uniform. This book is for human beings. For anyone who's been hurting quietly. For anyone who's been over-functioning and under-feeling. For anyone who's lost connection with themselves and wants to come back.

If any part of you has been struggling to breathe emotionally, I offer up this book as your oxygen. So you can inhale life deeply, once again.

## **The Possibility of Growth After Trauma**

There's a term for what happens when people not only recover from trauma—but rise from it with new strength, clarity, and purpose. Trauma doesn't just vanish. But it doesn't have to win. You can evolve from it. Not the same as before, but stronger. Clearer. More alive.

This potential within you is: Post. Traumatic. Growth.

Post-traumatic growth holds the promise of not just bouncing back, but bouncing forward. It's the inner transformation that happens when we stop avoiding our pain and start working with it. It's not just about reverting to your baseline—to who you were—but growing forward to who you can become.

More empathic. More grounded. More connected to what matters most.

Post-traumatic growth doesn't just help you survive—but to thrive. It multiplies your ability to live, love, and lead with purpose. It strengthens your inner relationship with your mind, your body, your soul.

When you face your pain instead of burying it, you unlock compassion and meaning.

This book isn't just about healing old wounds—it's about discovering the wisdom within them.

The BRAVE framework is how we get to new heights, from the depths of where we are right now. It's a roadmap for the next chapter of your life—one that isn't defined by what hurt you, but by what's possible now.

You'll need to be BRAVE. Because healing is possible—but it's also a choice you have to make.

## **One Final Truth Before We Begin**

By now, maybe you've started to realize—you've been carrying more than you ever allowed yourself to name.

You've also learned something that most of us don't realize without a good therapist: Trauma can live in silence. It often wears disguises—overwork, burnout, people-pleasing, anxiety, disconnection, or confusion.

But here's the good news—trauma doesn't get the final word.

Yes, it can knock the wind out of you. Yes, it can rewire how you experience the world, and yourself. But trauma isn't the end of the story. For many of us, it's the beginning of something else—something deeper. When you stop running from what hurt you, when you finally turn toward it with compassion and curiosity instead of shame, something unexpected can happen: You *transform*.

Not in spite of the pain—but because of what it taught you.

That's the core idea behind post-traumatic growth. And it's exactly what the BRAVE framework is built to support.

Here's a truth most people avoid: Healing isn't always graceful. It's not linear. It doesn't always feel like progress. Sometimes it feels like unraveling. That's because your brain and body were designed to protect you from pain—not to voluntarily revisit it. Healing is challenging. It's confusing. And it's a choice you have to keep making.

But you don't need to carry this alone anymore. You don't have to earn your right to heal. You don't have to keep performing "well enough" just to survive the day.

You don't need to have it all figured out. You just need the willingness to start.

You've already done the hard part—you made it here.

The next step is simple: Read. Breathe. Reflect. And walk with me. Let's begin.

## **BRAVE Insight No. 1**

You don't need a diagnosis or anyone else's permission to acknowledge—and start to put down—the heavy load you've been carrying.

## **Trauma Take-Aways**

Trauma is not always forged in loud, explosive moments, but in quiet, smoldering ones when you didn't receive the support and recognition you deserved. Trauma is psychological injury so complete that your body and nervous system can't find their way back to safety without some emotional reinforcement. It's not about being broken—it's about biology. Unprocessed trauma can hijack your nervous system—keeping you in a state of hypervigilance long after the threat has passed and rewiring how you experience connection and trust.

Post-traumatic growth refers to the inner transformation that is possible when you stop avoiding your pain and find the wisdom in it. True resilience isn't about reverting to your baseline (bouncing back), but about rising with new strength, clarity and purpose (bouncing forward).

## **BRAVE Playbook: Notice Your Baseline**

Consider the ways in which trauma is echoing in your life. Ask yourself what true healing would look like. That's the work.

Visit the *Live Brave Today Companion Workbook* to further reflect on your current state of mental health, and to set some goals for your own post-traumatic growth.

If staring down your backpack creates discomfort, consider visiting the **Reset Toolkit** that appears following the Epilogue for tools and techniques to calm your

nervous system. If your discomfort is overwhelming or begins to impact your daily activities, consider seeking professional counseling or the *Crisis Resources* as outlined in the **Disclaimer**.

## **CHAPTER 2 PREVIEW**

### **BRAVERY—CHOOSING ACTION OVER FEAR**

In the next chapter, I'll introduce you to the first practice in the BRAVE framework: **Bravery**.

Not the external heroism you've been taught to applaud—like running into burning buildings, charging into battle, or dodging bullets. The BRAVE framework calls for a different form of bravery: the internal kind. The bravery it takes to stop running from your pain. The bravery it takes to revisit what you've buried. The bravery it takes to sit with discomfort, rather than numbing it. The bravery it takes to say, "I want to heal, even if it's hard." Bravery isn't about never feeling fear—it's about learning to move with it instead of being paralyzed by it.

The ultimate brave act doesn't look like cliff diving. It's admitting when you're drowning and letting someone throw you a line.

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## Chapter 2

# BRAVERY—CHOOSING ACTION OVER FEAR

*Bravery is the willingness to move forward even when fear is present.*

**BRAVE Toolkit Step:** Choose belief over self-doubt.

Start by Asking Yourself: "Where in my life am I avoiding discomfort instead of facing it?"

Here's the connection many people miss: Trauma teaches your nervous system that silence equals safety and that hiding equals survival. Bravery is the antidote—it's how you teach your body that it's safe to feel, safe to be seen, and safe to heal—instead of just staying upright.

Trauma installs shields. Armor. Defense mechanisms. It takes courage—real courage—to lower those defenses, even just a little. That's what this chapter is about.

Not becoming fearless, but choosing action in the face of fear. Not rushing your healing, but approaching it with intention.

Gaining courage isn't just about external action. It's about internal revolution.

### **The Myth of Bravery**

When most people hear the word "bravery," they picture Hollywood moments: running into burning buildings, charging toward danger, standing tall in front of an admiring crowd. The spotlight's always blazing. The music's always swelling. But real life isn't a movie script.

We've been taught that bravery is for a select few: epic risks and superhero stunts. But the truth is, bravery begins with self-honesty. Saying "I'm scared," "I need help," or "This hurts"—that's the foundation. Real courage is private and personal.

Bravery is rarely loud. More often than not, it's quiet. Invisible. Sometimes, no one even notices—except you.

In my 30-plus years as a firefighter, people have called me brave more times than I can count. But here's the truth: Most of what looked like bravery on the outside was just training, muscle memory, and reflex. That's preparation. That's the courage that comes from repetition—countless “reps” over time, until action becomes second-nature.

Pulling someone from a fire? That's not what scared me.

You know what did? The simple, terrifying act of walking into my first counseling appointment.

Walking through the therapist's door was like crossing an invisible threshold—from a professional helper, to a real person in need of help. A career hero afraid of being labeled “unfit for duty” for having a human streak. No longer a certified rescuer, but possibly just “certifiable.”

Entering that counseling office, for the first time, was brave. Because bravery isn't about being fearless—it's about emotional truth-telling when fear is sitting right beside you. True bravery lives in the small, quiet decisions we make to face what hurts and reclaim what matters.

You don't need to slay dragons to be brave. You just need to face yourself.

## **The Most Underrated Survival Skill**

Bravery, in the context of trauma recovery, is about facing those inner fears and the discomfort that comes with revisiting all the painful shit we've had to deal with. It's about having the courage to confront it, and lean into it, so real healing can begin—and that's where the real glory is.

True bravery isn't always about external acts of heroism. Often, it's about the internal battles we fight to reclaim our sense of self, and of peace. This type of courage can be incredibly hard, because our brains and bodies are wired to protect us from pain. When we experience trauma, our defense mechanisms push those painful memories down, creating a kind of emotional shield.

Confronting that pain means lowering that shield, which can feel uncomfortably vulnerable or overwhelming. It requires grit, a network of support, and sometimes professional guidance to navigate those feelings safely. But it's also the first act of self-rescue.

That's why this chapter isn't about fearlessness—it's about awareness, presence, and choosing to move forward, even when you don't feel ready.

## **Be Your Own Green Light**

We often wait to feel our confidence ignite before we take action—believing we'll move forward once we feel good and ready. But here's what we don't realize: Confidence is often a byproduct, not a propellant. It's built through forward momentum, not before it.

Bravery doesn't always mean that you already feel certain. It often means you have to move through the uncertainty and act anyway, to gain the traction you need.

With trembling hands. With a racing heart. With the voice in your head whispering, "What if I fail?"

If we think of confidence as the reward of bravery, not the prerequisite—we can give ourselves the green light we've been waiting for.

## **2.1 READER REFLECTION**

### **Where in my life am I being asked to be brave right now?**

#### *Breathe and Be Present: Simple Breath of Fire Technique*

Take a deep inhale through your nostrils. Then exhale sharply through your nose—like you're blowing out a candle with it. Repeat the pattern with quick,

rhythmic nasal inhales and exhales for about 15 to 20 seconds. Then pause—and notice the buzz.

This breathwork is designed to energize you. It activates your sympathetic nervous system—a controlled burst of energy that says: I'm alive, I'm alert, I'm choosing to move. Bravery doesn't always need calm. It needs ignition, too. Breathwork lights the match.

Now, think about a situation, a relationship, or an inner struggle where fear, avoidance, or numbness has been taking the wheel.

- What am I feeling? Does it have a name? Is it: *Anger. Anxiety. Depression. Confusion. Grief. Guilt. Shame. Or something else?*
- What have I been avoiding? When was the last time fear stopped me from action?
- What would bravery look like here—even if it's just one micro-step?

Then, visualize something powerful: If nothing was holding you back—who would you become?

Picture the version of yourself that feels free, joyful, and fully alive. Picture the version of “you” that has taken the wheel, once again.

What does that “you” look like? What does that “you” believe? How does that “you” move through the world?

Let this be your first act of brave self-awareness and bold self-creation. You don't need to be perfect to step toward that version of yourself. You just need to begin.

If you're drawing a blank, if you have an energy block that prevents you from visualizing your future self, if your ability to dream big has been impaired—that's information, too. That's your nervous system saying, "I'm not ready to hope yet."

And that's okay. We'll start there.

If you need to, refer to the *Crisis Resources* outlined in the **Disclaimer**, or the exercises introduced in the **Reset Toolkit** that follows the Epilogue.

## **My First Real Lesson in Bravery**

**A Lazy Summer Afternoon, 1974. Winnemucca, Nevada.**

I was about five years old. The Christensen clan—my then-intact family of four—piled into our old station wagon for our annual summer drive from the Bay Area to Boise, Idaho. We'd split the 11-hour trip into two days, our halfway stop always the same: Winnemucca, a dusty little Western town built on mining and ranching. It wasn't Disneyland. But it did have a motel with a swimming pool—an oasis after countless miles on the road.

And at that oasis stood the tallest slide I'd ever seen.

From the ground, it looked intimidating enough. But from the top? From the eyes of a 5-year-old? It looked like it bordered on outer space. The gap between each step was roughly the distance from my toothpick waist to my kindergarten-sized feet.

My older brother Randy leaped up the steps and flew down first, laughing and landing in the water. No big deal, like it wasn't a death-defying act.

My dad coaxed me to follow. I climbed the ladder, step by shaky step. When I reached the top—scanning the highest and most terrifying view of my young life—my legs locked.

Cold water rushed from the ports atop the slide, spraying down the entire length, waterfalling into the deep end of the swimming pool. Those depths were territory I didn't go willingly. I lost the security of the concrete sidewalls, my toes touching the familiar bottom of the shallow end. I sat down on the top of the slide's deck, my bare legs sticking slightly to the plastic upstream from the water jets.

I could hear kids laughing and splashing below, my dad's voice cheering me on. He began to lead the small crowd of strangers—fellow highway warriors gathered poolside in the middle of nowhere—in a chorus of "*Robbie! Robbie! Robbie!*"

Everything in me wanted to retreat. My chest tightened. My breath grew shallow. The roar of the water rushing down the slide matched the volume of fear building inside my 3-foot-five frame. I remember staring down at the swirling pool below, certain that I wouldn't survive. I felt alone—even with all those people watching.

This wasn't just a moment of hesitation. It was the first time I remember wrestling with real fear—an invisible, full-body grip that said, “Don't do it. Stay safe. Stay up here.”

And I almost did.

But then something inside me shifted. I still don't know exactly what it was—maybe the belief in my dad's reassuring voice, maybe the tiny voice inside me whispering, “Just try.”

Whatever it was, I leaned forward. I let go. I launched.

The baby-blue fiberglass slide shot me like a bullet through icy jets of water. I hit the pool with a chaotic splash. Chlorine slammed up my nose, my mouth wide open in a sound I couldn't tell was a scream or a laugh. I swallowed some stinging water and flailed for a second. But then I surfaced.

I had done it. And something in me knew it mattered.

I remember the rush—of both the ride and the adrenaline that followed. I remember the pride. I remember the surprise: I'm okay. I didn't die. More than that, I remember the warmth in my dad's smile when I looked over at him. He saw me. He saw what that moment had just earned me.

No trophy. No certificate. Just a moment of truth between fear and action.

What I didn't know then—what no one taught me—is that the brain doesn't distinguish between real danger and perceived danger. Neuroscience suggests that whether you're facing a physical threat or an emotional one, your amygdala fires the same distress signals. That slide wasn't going to kill me, but my 5-year-old brain couldn't tell the difference.

That ride became a defining memory—not because it was dramatic, but because it was mine. No one else could feel what I felt in that moment. No one else could make the decision for me. And no one else could experience that first, private taste of chlorine water mixed with courage.

Bravery isn't about eliminating fear—it's about moving forward while your alarm system is still on high alert. You don't need to be fearless to be brave. You just

need to move from the edge of fear, to get unstuck from the landing deck of the slide.

Conquering that slide was my first brave act. And it planted something in me that would grow over time: the understanding that real bravery doesn't always come with applause. Sometimes, it comes with trembling hands, soaked swim trunks, and a whispered, "I did it"—when no one else can hear. And that? That's enough.

## **What We Decide After Trauma Makes the Choice**

Years later, I'd learn to name that spark of courage: Steering ahead when fear is riding shotgun. But at five, I just called it *let go*.

That towering slide taught me that I had the power within me to choose to move through fear—and that's inner bravery.

But there's a difference between fear you can walk away from, and fear that paralyzes you completely—fear that steals your voice, locks your body, and removes the option to make any choice at all.

Sometimes fear gives you the mental freedom to choose your response, to dare to act with courage.

But deeply rooted trauma can put you on the fast-track to fight, flight, or freeze. The reaction isn't voluntary. It's steeped in survival.

I would learn that difference five years later, standing frozen in my living room, the 10-year-old unable to answer a ringing phone. That wasn't hesitation. That was shutdown. That was my nervous system protecting me the only way it knew how—by going offline completely. Just as it did two decades later, when that same paralysis would resurface on what should have been a routine medical call, in ways I never saw coming.

Being launched into fight, flight or freeze is not something we choose. That's an automated response. But choosing to be brave in trauma's wake is a decision that's ours to make.

## Fear Is Not the Enemy

For years, I believed fear was something to conquer—a weakness to overpower. But I've since learned something to the contrary: Fear is just data. It's your nervous system saying: *Pay attention.*

What this means for you:

- Your body's fear response isn't betrayal—it's intelligence.
- You don't need to fight against it. You need to lean into it.
- Bravery starts when we stop judging our fear, and start translating it.

Here's the science behind this revelation: When you acknowledge fear instead of fighting it, something remarkable happens in your brain. Research shows that naming an emotion—actually placing words on what you're feeling—activates your prefrontal cortex and helps regulate your amygdala's panic response. That's why acknowledging, "I'm scared," is more powerful than pretending that you're not.

Your brain calms down when you tell it the truth.

Dr. Caroline Leaf, a cognitive neuroscientist and author of *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, offers a reframe that changed everything for me: "It's not abnormal to feel mental distress. What's abnormal is ignoring it."

Dr. Leaf suggests that emotions like anxiety, depression, or feeling unsettled aren't disorders—they're warning signals. They're your brain and body trying to tell you that something is unprocessed, unhealed, or misaligned. She underscores that:

- Emotional pain is a response, not a flaw.
- Suppressing your emotions doesn't make you strong—it makes you stuck.
- Healing requires listening to your signals, not silencing them.

We need to listen to our internal alarm system—with compassion, patience and curiosity. But once we understand that fear is information—an ally rather than an adversary—we can shift from playing defense, to running our own plays.

## **Timed Release: The Power of Functional Bravery**

Playing offense can mean choosing when to react in the moment, and when to take a tactical time-out—setting aside both the emotion, and the deeper reflection, for later. Not side-stepping the uncomfortable feelings that stem from traumatic episodes. Bookmarking them. Placing them in an invisible vault for temporary safekeeping, but storing the combination within reach.

That choice unlocks a quieter, deeper bravery—the kind that knows the difference between compartmentalizing to cover over your pain, and compartmentalizing so you can sort through your backpack and clear it out later.

In high-stakes professions, we don't always get the luxury of feeling in real time. We train ourselves to stay focused—to respond to the scene, to manage the incident, to finish out the call. To stay sharp on the outside, even when our insides are falling apart.

Sometimes the bravest thing you can do in the middle of a crisis is to stay present, stay operational, and promise yourself that you'll return to unpack the experience in a more stable moment. This kind of unsung bravery doesn't necessarily look like courage from the outside—but it's what keeps us performing under pressure.

I call it “functional” bravery—the act of showing up without flinching, even when your heart is imploding. It's holding it together as the catastrophe unfolds, not because you don't have feelings—but because the moment demands your composure.

First responders answering an emergency call, parents handling a family disaster, teachers managing a classroom meltdown, employees navigating a workplace crisis—we all need to compartmentalize from time to time. We push through the tough call, the personal crisis, the disruptive student, the high-profile meeting. We stay upright, we move forward—but we also add more weight to our pack.

That's not failure. That's not emotional suppression. It's emotional regulation—inserting a healthy pause to allow our mind to process what we've been dealt, before acting on impulse. It's parking our more primitive mental reflexes so our wise, rational mind can eventually clock in.

Here's where it gets dangerous, though: When the crisis is over, and we don't allow ourselves to revisit it, mentally and emotionally. To debrief with ourselves, to retrieve what we shoved in our vault, to feel what we couldn't feel in the midst of chaos.

To sift through the new rocks lodged in the backpack.

There was a time in the fire service when we joked about having an unofficial motto: "Admit nothing. Deny everything. Distract from feeling anything." Like all coping humor, it carried some truth. In many ways, it was a shield that worked—until it didn't.

Functional bravery is deferred maintenance—not denial.

Courage isn't just staying calm in the crisis. It's daring to revisit the pain later, in safety, and process what you couldn't before. Bravery doesn't mean never shutting down—it means knowing when and how to return to stored feeling-memories, when your heart and mind can come back online.

## 2.2 READER REFLECTION

### Where do I need to return and reintegrate?

**Breathe and Be Present.**

Sit in stillness, and slow your exhale. Anchor yourself in this moment: Presence begins with observation—not judgment.

Now, think about a painful episode you haven't returned to. Is there a rock you're ready to unearth from your pack?

*Remember.* What did I witness, experience, or endure that has latched onto me?

*Name.* What feeling does this episode carry?

*Notice.* Where am I holding that feeling-memory in my body? Where did that get planted and settle in?

*Normalize.* Of course this hit me hard. I'm human. It's normal to feel the impact. I forgive myself for feeling the weight of this load.

*Respond.* Offer yourself compassion. A hand on your heart, a message to yourself: You're okay. You're doing your best.

Consider this exercise any time you need to examine new rocks that have lodged in your pack.

If you need to, refer to the *Crisis Resources* outlined in the **Disclaimer**, or the exercises introduced in the **Reset Toolkit** that follows the Epilogue.

## **Truth-Telling: Where Real Courage Is Built**

You don't suddenly wake up brave. Bravery is built through reps. Small, quiet reps.

Making the call you've been avoiding. Admitting when you don't have the answer. Asking for help. Speaking your truth, even when your voice shakes.

One of the bravest conversations I've ever had wasn't in a firehouse or on a rescue scene. It was sitting across from a close friend, telling him I was worried about his drinking. Over time, he'd become the person no one wanted to be around. The asshole at every gathering.

I suspected part of him didn't want anyone close—that he was battling demons he was deeply embarrassed about, but didn't know how to face, let alone defeat. So he pushed everyone away, before they could leave on their own.

I didn't know how my friend would respond to a Come-to-Jesus session, to my earnest appeal that he get himself some help. I didn't know if we would still be friends—and that would be a significant loss. But I knew my silence was a lie.

My friend knew I would be the one to give him a reality check. And because my concern came from a place of genuine love, compassion and empathy, he couldn't fight it. He didn't want to.

That sincerity helped him. Not because I had the perfect words, but because someone who cared enough to risk a friendship dared to tell the truth.

When someone is struggling, sometimes the bravest thing they can do is to admit it. And sometimes the bravest thing you can do is to see their struggle and speak truth into their life—even when it's uncomfortable for both of you. Because

bravery isn't fearlessness. Bravery is doing the “hard right” thing even when you're terrified of what it might cost you.

That's honest bravery. That's where the real growth happens. And those are the moments where we gain the kind of courage that sticks.

## **Bravery Builds Trust, Not Just Results**

I once led my crew through a stressful stretch—back-to-back calls that kicked us in the shins, no sleep, heavy emotional weight. Team morale was slipping, and I felt it, too.

One morning, instead of lining out our next tasks and faking that I had it all together, I sat everyone down and simply said, "I'm tired. I know you are, too. We're going to take care of each other today. Nobody's carrying this alone."

That small moment—of honesty instead of bravado—shifted something in the room. We showed up for each other differently that day. Because bravery builds trust. And trust builds relationships that last.

Which brings me to a moment that changed everything for me. A moment when someone else's bravery gave me permission to find my own.

## **When My Captain Saw Me Breaking**

Early 1998. Ada County, Idaho.

The call shouldn't have broken me, three years into an otherwise solid firefighting career.

It was a routine medical call—the standard CPR drill—for an elderly man who'd coded unexpectedly, during an equally ordinary breakfast.

When our crew arrived, the smell of fresh coffee and bacon still hung in the air. Food sat untouched on the table. A comfortable, cozy kitchen where a long-married couple had been starting another day, their 50th anniversary photo prominently displayed on a nearby hutch.

The scene was deceptively calm. Captain Jim Peterson's hands were locked over the man's sternum, elbows straight, body rocking in perfect sync to the beat of

"Stayin' Alive." The fire service teaches us to perform CPR synchronized to the Bee Gee's epic rhythm to keep compressions at the right pace. But there's always an edge of irony to it, working on someone with no heartbeat while the anthem in your head chants, *Stayin' Alive... Stayin' Alive ...*

Captain Peterson's focus was absolute, each compression steady and resolved. Familiar sounds filled the modest kitchen: the mechanical whoosh of the bag-valve mask, the steady count under Peterson's breath, the quiet hum of the nearby refrigerator.

But something else filled that space for me—something invisible and suffocating. The man's stunned wife stood beside me, her weathered hands clasped in front of her chest, eyes fixed on her husband's still face. She didn't cry. She didn't speak. She just waited, with that strange calm that comes with disbelief mixed with hope.

That's when it hit me.

Not the medical emergency itself—I'd been on dozens of these calls. It was the weight of the wife's silent vigil. The way she trusted us so completely, while her world crumbled. The way she stood entirely still, as if moving might somehow make this real.

"Can you tell me about his medical history?" I asked. And then my throat sealed tight.

I knew the standard questions. I'd asked them a hundred times before. But this time, they wouldn't come. My voice was gone. My pen hovered over the intake form, but no words came. The familiar boxes—patient name, medications, timeline—just disappeared from my line of sight. *Gone.*

I stood there for what felt like an eternity—probably all of five seconds. But it was obvious, even to the wife in her state of bewilderment, that things weren't registering for me. The should-be rescuer, seizing up in her breakfast nook.

Captain "Pete" glanced up at me between compressions, his eyes asking the silent question: *You getting this?*

But I was slipping into an abyss, paralyzed by something I couldn't name. The same body that once stood immobile at 10 years old—frozen once again, but now all grown up and wearing a firefighter's uniform.

Scientists call it “tonic immobility”—TI. The body's ancient shutdown switch, hardwired into our nervous system long before we had words for it. It's the same response that makes a rabbit go limp in a coyote's mouth. Not *playing* dead—actually shutting down. The nervous system's final exit ramp when neither fight nor flight are options.

In humans, TI is often described as “freezing”—an involuntary paralysis in response to extreme or inescapable threats, a last-resort defense mechanism. Under TI, a person's body may go rigid, they may lose the ability to move or speak, and their perception of pain may decrease. While someone in a TI state may maintain consciousness, they may also report feelings of disassociation, a degree of detachment from their current reality.

TI is a hard-wired emotional survival reflex—never a conscious choice or a sign of consent during a threatening or violent encounter. But TI often leads to feelings of confusion, self-blame, and shame among those who've experienced this unnerving, involuntary shutdown.

It took me nearly three decades to put a name on the short-circuit I'd experienced as a young boy, and again as a young man. Different decade, different crisis—same defensive glitch. My body still remembered the only survival strategy it had ever learned: Disappear inside yourself.

Ten-year-old Robbie had wrestled with the collapse of his family and the partial collapse of his house; with neglect and violent adults; with the constant threat of mega-jails and earthquakes. Twenty-eight-year-old Rob had carried forward that unresolved childhood trauma, and layered the vicarious trauma of a firefighting career right over the top.

I was wrestling with “operator syndrome” before Dr. Chris Frueh would coin the term—compounding afflictions like traumatic brain injury/concussions, hormonal dysregulation, sleep disruption, chronic pain, depression, anger, insomnia, substance abuse, existential crises, and more—all bundled together in one exhausted body. Operator syndrome is allostatic load—on steroids.

As I found myself immobilized once again, Captain Pete kept working—steady compressions, eyes focused. But he saw me shut down. He saw everything.

I stepped out of the room without a word. Took a reset breath and gathered myself in the hallway. Came back in, and somehow finished the necessary questions.

Nobody said anything when the call ended. But on the drive back to the station, the truth hit me like a freight train: I was unraveling. And if I couldn't trust myself on a routine call, how could I be a firefighter?

That fear lived in my chest for days.

### **The Bravery to Face What Hurts**

Captain Pete didn't bring it up right away. He waited until the next shift, when he found me working alone in the apparatus bay on a side project.

"Hey, I need to talk to you for a second," he finally said.

"Yes, sir?"

"That call last week. I think you need to go talk to somebody." He put it right out there, not mincing his words.

My stomach dropped, with the intensity of a burning roof collapsing. Part of me had been hoping my supervisor and mentor would stick with the "easy wrong"—just let it slide, pretend it didn't happen.

But that wasn't Jim Peterson. He led with compassion, care, transparency—and absolute honesty. Even when—especially when—it was uncomfortable. He had chosen to do the hard right thing.

My initial reaction was a cocktail of emotions: Embarrassment. Fear—deep, gnawing fear that I was losing my mind and my place at the firehouse. And rebellion, even knowing I had no justification to push back. Captain Pete was not only right—he was damn right.

I was drowning in uncertainty. Would Captain Pete report this to our fire chief? Would my fail get out to my co-workers? Was my service in jeopardy—my firefighting career over, when it was just ramping up?

"Yes, sir," I complied. Captain Pete nodded and walked away.

That was it. Short, direct, straight to the point—no punches pulled. The conversation that would change my life took all of 30 seconds, and my last ounce of resistance.

## **The Tough Call after the Tough Call**

I made the call the day after I finished my shift. Tried to talk myself out of it. Realized it was the only move I had left, if I wanted to keep my job in the fire service.

I knew, more than anything, that I wanted to be not just a firefighter, but a real pipe hitter—a stand-out crew member. And choking in critical moments, and joining the ranks of the elite, did not align. Getting my head back on straight was a non-negotiable.

So I sat in my own kitchen, flipping through the phone book—long before the ease of searching online and reading reviews. Found a counselor whose listing sounded non-threatening, whose last name seemed somehow safe. Dialed the number.

A woman answered, her tone soothing and sincere: "How can I help you?"

"I need to make an appointment."

"What brings you in?"

I took a shallow breath. "My captain told me I need to come talk to somebody."

Turns out, setting the appointment was the easy part. The hard part was the appointment hovering over me, for the long week leading up to that first visit.

## **The Walk of Shame**

Driving to that first appointment felt like heading to my own execution.

I didn't know what to expect. Some over-educated shrink—who'd never swung an axe or hoisted a fire hose—was supposed to help me sort through decades of inexplicable shit, save my job, and rescue my sanity?

I doubted anyone had the skills to pull that off—not without having walked, stumbled, and tripped all those miles in my boots.

I told myself: I'll drive there. I'll park. But if I see one familiar vehicle in that parking lot—one single car I recognize—I'm gone. I'll keep driving, and never come back.

When I arrived at the counseling office, I didn't see any vehicles I recognized. But I still parked a block away. Then I executed a half military-crawl from the parking lot to the building, ducking through the bushes, scanning for anyone who might recognize me.

That's how deep the stigma ran. Getting myself into the counselor's office felt like a walk of shame. I know now that I wasn't doing anything to be ashamed of—I was getting the help I deserved. But it sure as hell didn't feel that way.

That's what stigma does. It turns courage into something you have to hide.

## **You're Not the Only One**

I felt shame. I felt embarrassment. I felt lost.

Walking into that office, I had no real sense of direction—only fear and self-doubt. At first, I was hanging on the counselor's every word, like it was the ladder of a fire truck. An emotional lifeline. Once I made it past the threshold into her office, she had my undivided attention.

I started to ramble on, reaching for the right words—to describe the freeze, the fear, the doubt about whether I could keep performing in a high-pressure role. She listened, nodded, and then said something that changed my entire perspective:

"You're not the only firefighter I've seen. *Not even* my first. I've had numerous first responder clients."

Turns out I wasn't alone. I wasn't broken. I wasn't the only one struggling to process what a career in emergency response brings.

I grew to learn that while some first responders can avoid internalizing the vicarious trauma and adversity that comes with active duty, many of us draw in

these exposures like a magnet. It's worth repeating the insight from Chapter 1: Trauma isn't about weakness—it's about the condition of the individual nervous system that absorbs it. My neural circuitry—like that of many other firefighters—had been ridden roughshod for too many years.

Ten minutes into the dreaded appointment, I went from doubting my sanity to a sense of solidarity. Relief flooded through me in an instant.

And then came the anger.

I grew up the son of a firefighter. I had an older brother in the service. Friends. Co-workers. Nobody said boo about it. And that silence almost cost me everything.

That's why I'm writing this book.

It's why I fly the flag I fly now: You are not alone. We need to extinguish the stigma of suffering from mental health concerns. If one triggered moment on a routine call can nearly end a promising career, imagine what a lifetime of those moments—endured in emotional isolation—could do to even the strongest among us.

Instead, one reluctant phone call—just three years into a job that I thought I was already losing—bought me back a career that has now spanned more than 30.

## **How a Captain's Order Set Me Free**

After that first counseling session—and the ones that followed—I felt lighter. More clear. More confident.

Knowing there was a clinical explanation for my short-circuits was half the battle. Knowing there were tools to help was the other half.

I worked through EMDR. Started breathwork, meditation, journaling. Learned somatic exercises that helped me regulate my nervous system, instead of allowing it to hijack me.

But the biggest shift wasn't the product of those techniques. It was the *permission*. Permission to be human. Permission to struggle. Permission to ask for help without it meaning I was helpless.

Captain Pete saw me breaking down and didn't look away. He didn't shame me, or write me off. He spoke truth into my life and pointed me toward the real help I'd needed—and deserved. That's what real leadership—and humanity—looks like.

In a culture that teaches us that silence equals strength, choosing to be seen in the struggle is revolutionary. And those brave decisions—his to speak up, mine to follow through—saved my career.

Likely saved my life.

## **When Healing Lets You Hold the Seat**

Years after Captain Pete pointed me toward the help I didn't know I needed, I started to find myself on the other side of the equation. No longer the one who needed a steady hand, but the one who could offer it. For my co-workers, for my friends, for others who entered my life.

Her name was Alexia. She was 5 or 6, all skinny legs and wild determination, gripping the small handlebars like they might save her life. Afraid—but working herself up to fearless. Her own version of steering ahead, while fear perched in her invisible sidecar.

I'd been dating Alexia's mom for a while—long enough to know I wanted to marry her, which I eventually would. Long enough to know this little girl was becoming mine in ways that had nothing to do with marriage licenses and custody arrangements.

"Don't let go," she said, her tiny feet glued to the pedals.

"I won't let go yet," I told her.

And then I did.

She didn't know—not right away. That was the point. If she'd known right then, she might have panicked, overcorrected, crashed. So I gently released my grip on the bike seat and moved beside her, jogging to keep up as she pedaled forward on her own.

Gradually, something shifted in her awareness. Maybe she felt the absence of the weight of my hand on the seat. Maybe she noticed I was no longer behind her, but beside her. Maybe she felt the power of her own steering.

Within that moment, she knew.

"You let go!"

But she didn't fall. She kept riding.

I think about that ride often.

Not because it was extraordinary—most parents can recall this same moment of letting-go. But because it showed me something I couldn't have understood at 28, white-knuckling my way through that first therapy appointment: Bravery isn't just personal: It's transferable.

But you can't pass it along if you're still drowning in anxiety, yourself.

The courage my dad instilled in me on that Winnemucca slide, I got to pay forward to Alexia on that bike. But I couldn't have been that calm, steady presence at 35 if I hadn't done the work. Captain Pete's intervention didn't just save my career—it made me capable of showing up for a little girl who needed someone to believe in her, as much as she was trying to believe in herself.

That's what healing does. It doesn't just free you from your pain. It frees you to be there for someone else.

Alexia and I would go on to share 9 years under the same roof while I was married to her mother, my first wife. When that union ended, my relationship with Alexia didn't.

Sometimes, the love you've built is just as strong as the love you were born into. Some bonds aren't built on biology or marital status. They're built on showing up—on running alongside someone until they find their balance, and then trusting both of you enough to let go.

Sometimes, bravery isn't just what we risk for ourselves. It's what we risk for the people we choose to love—and what we trust them to risk for themselves.

Soon after BRAVE lands on the shelves, I'll dance with Alexia on her wedding day during the father-daughter number. I'll share this honor with her biological father, who's been gracious enough to continue to share his little girl with me. Not because I have any claim by blood or by law, but because my step-daughter asked me to. Because we built something together—one brave, wobbly ride at a time.

### **Tim-Bravery: How Asking for Help Built a Lifeline**

It was 3 a.m. on a Tuesday morning when my phone rang.

Tim, a fellow firefighter—and more importantly, my good friend—was on the other end. Reaching for a lifeline as he was being pulled down a deep emotional well.

Earlier in the day, Tim had witnessed something. Not a catastrophe. Just an ordinary suburban scene. Commonplace enough—unless you were hauling Tim's invisible duffel bag, overstuffed with heavy emotional burdens. The otherwise harmless snapshot catapulted Tim into an intense flashback—haunting memories which he instinctively worked to shove down.

A few years back, Tim had responded to a heart-wrenching 911 call. A young child had been struck and killed by a vehicle while crossing the street alongside his mother. The boy was gone in an instant, before the emergency crews arrived. None of Tim's extensive training, his vast experience, or his aching drive to help, could bring the child back.

In the hours before my phone rang, Tim had encountered an emotional set-up. Another child biking across a crosswalk, about the same age as the one he'd found lifeless on his shift just three years ago. Crossing the street in a nearly identical location, within a few feet of his own mother. This time, in safety.

But in that split-second, Tim's mind spiraled—triggering a wave of pent-up anguish. And just as quickly, his brain did what it knew how to do: Compartmentalize. Deflect. Protect.

Tim carried that exhumed tragedy with him all day—trauma running quietly in the background like an app he forgot to close, pulsing beneath the noise of his

daily routine. But when he finally laid his head on his pillow that night and the distractions fell away, dark imprints came flooding back.

Images. Sounds. Feelings of helplessness and sorrow. The echoes he'd been quietly outrunning since morning caught up with him, under the cover of night.

As we acknowledged in Chapter 1—that's how trauma works. It waits for stillness to launch its stealthy assault. By 3 a.m., Tim knew he couldn't contain the torment alone anymore, so he reached for his phone. Because he needed support. Because he knew I'd pick up.

I'd been honored to show up for Tim when he'd needed an “operational reset” in the past—listening, doing breathwork, meditating with him as he worked through acute anxiety tied to job-related trauma and multiple concussions. For Tim, like so many others in high-stakes roles, the body does keep the score.

"Hey—I just need some help," Tim said when I answered this time, his voice tight.

He sounded panicked. Overwhelmed. I said, as calmly as I could, “You're okay. You're in a safe place. Just breathe with me.”

I used my training in breathwork to guide Tim back into his body, back into the moment. Eventually, his nervous system started to settle. He thanked me. He went back to sleep.

Tim didn't need me to fix the grief. He just needed to find his way back to safety—and something to hold onto.

That night was a win. Not because Tim found all the answers, but because he chose to be seen. He reached out. He named what was happening. He asked for help.

And because of that brave choice, Tim reclaimed some ground from the trauma that had been lurking just below the surface. He took ownership. He booked a therapy session. He stepped back into the work—eyes open, shoulders squared, no longer running from the memory.

And he hasn't had a recurrence of such consuming anxiety since that night.

## **The Power of Prepared Bravery**

Rick Rescorla was the head of security for Morgan Stanley at the World Trade Center. Long before 9/11, he foresaw the potential for disaster and insisted on regular, regimented evacuation drills—even in the face of resistance.

When the first plane hit his building that horrific September day, Rescorla and his employees didn't panic. They moved. The crisis reflexes driven in by his drills saved more than 2,500 lives. He died going back in, trying to save even more.

This story matters because it shows us that bravery isn't just improvisation—it's also preparation. Rescorla didn't wait for fear to teach him how to act. He rehearsed courage.

But here's the deeper lesson for our own inner work: Rescorla's external bravery was built on countless small acts of internal bravery. Every time he insisted on another drill despite pushback, every time he chose preparation over complacency, every time he acted on his convictions despite criticism—he was building the muscle of courage.

The same principle applies to emotional bravery. We don't suddenly become brave in crisis. We become brave through daily practice—small moments of choosing truth over comfort, connection over protection, growth over safety.

Gaining courage can be strategic, not just spontaneous. The objective is to prepare in peace, so you can respond in crisis.

Practice emotional honesty in small moments, so you can access it when it matters most.

## **BRAVE Insight No. 2**

Bravery isn't about never feeling fear—it's about learning to move with it instead of being paralyzed by it. Once you understand that fear is information—an ally rather than an adversary—you can harness it, rather than letting it hold you back.

## **Bravery Take-Aways**

Bravery isn't about blockbuster heroics—it's about emotional self-honesty, steering ahead when fear is playing backseat driver, and facing not only your traumatic episodes, but the lingering discomfort they leave in their wake. Real bravery is private, and it whispers more often than it shouts. Courage isn't just staying calm in the crisis, but daring to revisit it later, to unpack the emotional experience that you couldn't before. Micro-bravery builds courage through small repetitions, like truth-telling. Often, confidence is the byproduct of bravery—not a precondition. It's about choosing to move forward, even when you don't feel ready. Ultimately, one of the bravest things you can do is to admit you need some back-up—from your friends, your mentor, or a skilled professional.

### **BRAVE Playbook: Practice Micro-Bravery**

Choose one small action this week that places you on the path to becoming the future “you” that you envisioned in READER REFLECTION 2.1. Select one small action step that you've been avoiding. Name the fear or the resistance sitting next to you, thank it for the information it has shared, and practice sitting with the discomfort, instead of numbing-out or practicing avoidance. Then, put your foot on the gas pedal, and steer forward. That's the work.

When you're ready, challenge yourself to conquering a new brave habit once a week, or seven days in a row. Visit the *Live Brave Today Companion Workbook* to track your micro-bravery goals and your growth.

If unzipping your backpack creates discomfort, consider visiting the **Reset Toolkit** that appears following the Epilogue for tools and techniques to calm your nervous system. If your discomfort is overwhelming or begins to impact your daily activities, consider seeking professional counseling or the *Crisis Resources* as outlined in the **Disclaimer**.

## **CHAPTER 3 PREVIEW: RESILIENCE— HOW TO BOUNCE FORWARD, NOT JUST BACK**

In the next chapter, I'll introduce you to the second practice in the BRAVE framework: **Resilience**. Not just bouncing back—but bouncing forward, to a more powerful version of yourself.

True resilience isn't about finding your way back to baseline, but finding the wisdom in your wounds to evolve, transform, and grow.

### **Gratefully Referenced:**

Leaf, C. (2021). *Cleaning up your mental mess: 5 simple, scientifically proven steps to reduce anxiety, stress, and toxic thinking*. Baker Books.

Frueh, C. (2024). *Operator syndrome*. Ballast Books.

## You've been carrying more than you know.

Maybe you call it stress. Burnout. Just feeling "off." You think you need to push harder, be tougher, stay the course. But what if your nervous system is simply exhausted from carrying burdens it never learned to unpack?

I know that place. I lived there for decades — armored up, high-performing, and silently drowning.

This is the book I wish I'd had then—the approach I eventually discovered that saved my career, my relationships, and ultimately, my life.

## BRAVE isn't just a framework—it's a lifeline.

When I froze on a routine call as a firefighter, I realized unprocessed childhood trauma was still driving my reactions as an adult. What I discovered through decades of purposeful healing became a compassionate system and mindset now transforming first responder communities, leadership circles, and people across all walks of life.

### Inside BRAVE, you'll learn:

- The 5-part framework that turns trauma into growth
- How to stop "performing" strength and truly embody it
- Why resilience means bouncing forward — with support, not silence
- The self-love breakthrough that changes everything
- Tools that work when you're overwhelmed and stuck, not just when you're motivated
- How vulnerability gives others permission to heal

This isn't theory or therapy — it's a battle plan.

From the 10-year-old who couldn't answer a ringing phone to the 55-year-old captain who finally said, "**I fucking love you, Rob**" — this journey became a breakthrough for thousands.

If I learned to love myself after five-plus decades of white-knuckling through life, you can too.

## AUTHOR BIO

**ROB Z. CHRISTENSEN** is a 30-year firefighter captain, a peer-support facilitator, and a cognitive performance coach featured in **The New York Times** and the award-winning documentary *An Act of Service* (Best Documentary, Aesthetica Film Festival 2024). His story continues in the upcoming film *Under Fire*.

Captain Christensen consults with first responder agencies, schools, and organizations across North America on trauma-informed peer support and leadership.

Rob lives in Boise, Idaho, and teaches that asking for help isn't weakness — it's survival.

## CALL TO ACTION

**The world doesn't need you to be perfect.**

It needs you to be **BRAVE**. Start your journey today.

Free companion toolkit at: [LiveBRAVEToday.com](https://LiveBRAVEToday.com)

## PUBLICATION INFO

ISBN 978-0-9961271-8-9

Psychology / Self-Help / Trauma Recovery

\$19.99 US

