Coping Skills and Reframing Failure

Changing Minds: Module 3

Coming to Terms

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*Reengaging With Life, Creating a New You*

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n the middle of my sophomore year at Barnard College, I attended a documentary screening at the annual Athena Film Festival. The film, *Brave Miss World*, tells the story of Linor Abargil, an Israeli model who was crowned Miss World in 1998. Seven weeks before receiving this title, Linor was raped by a travel agent in Milan. The documentary chronicles Linor’s battle to serve justice to her attacker, and the subsequent work she began to help other survivors. I was incredibly moved by Linor’s strength and bravery. Little did I know that soon, this film would save my life.

Three months later, I was raped and beaten by a stranger in a city far from home. I was twenty years old. Physically, he was much stronger than I was, and after he had pinned me down, I had no ability to fight him off. He told me he wouldn’t harm my face because he thought I was beautiful. But he pummeled me and left my body covered in scratches and bruises.

It took me several days before I could even utter the word “rape,” and it was months before I was able to recall certain details that my mind had blocked out.

I didn’t tell anyone about what happened, but my immediate thoughts turned to the film I had seen a few months before. While I was scared and shaken, I was quick to understand that I was a survivor, not a victim—and that I was not alone. The film gave me the courage and conviction to move forward.

I did finally confide in a few people, including my brother and a doctor. I thought the worst was behind me, but I was not prepared for the long road ahead. I didn’t tell my parents or my sister for a long time. Often, it’s more difficult to share terrible news with those you love the most.

I tried to push the incident out of my mind and just move on—but soon enough, I began to display symptoms of PTSD. Nightmares, flashbacks, and panic attacks haunted me. My brother was the only person who consistently checked in on me. I told some friends, and I suspect a few of them were afraid to talk to me about what had happened. Most friends I had told were very supportive … yet none of them knew how to help me.

Even my psychiatrist failed to follow through. When we finally scheduled a visit, two months after the rape, she forgot and missed the appointment. I tried seeking out support groups in New York, but was unsuccessful. Every lead resulted in a dead end. When I found a support group at a hospital, they denied me entry because of their rule that members could join only up to six months after the assault. They simply emailed me to advise I would not be welcome. They offered an individual meeting, but since I was already shut out of the group, I wasn’t interested.

I reached out to my school’s counseling center at the beginning of the fall semester. They were kind and promised to help me find a group. They sent one follow-up email, but then I never heard from them again. About a month later, I had a particularly crippling panic attack in my dorm room. My roommate called Health Services, but they told her since it was Sunday evening, I had to go to an emergency room. I went back to the counseling center later that week, and this time they gave me the phone number of a clinic in Manhattan. I called to make an appointment, but because I was not suicidal, the earliest time slot they could offer me was more than a month later. I knew I would not last that long.

With the help of my parents, in whom I finally confided, and my roommate, I found a private therapist. We worked together through intensive therapy, often meeting three times a week. During this time, I was carrying a full load of courses, working in an internship off-campus, and serving as an active member of committees for both Barnard College and the Columbia/Barnard Hillel.

During the summer, I met with the Hillel rabbi and told him what had happened to me. I asked him to help me create a program in school relating to mental health awareness. I needed to channel my energy into making something positive evolve from this horror—to make sense of something so senseless.

That was the day the Columbia/Barnard Hillel’s Mental Health Awareness Month was born. I emailed Cecelia Peck, the director of *Brave Miss World*, and told her my story. She responded within twenty minutes, giving me the confidence boost I needed. We screened her film on Wednesday, November 20, 2013. Watching Linor on screen again emboldened me to address the audience after the film and describe what had happened to me. This was the first time I’d spoken publicly about the incident.

The decision to write for *The i’Mpossible Project* was not an easy one, but it has been an important part of my healing process. It’s daunting to imagine the many people who will read this and learn what happened to me: extended family, close friends, ex-boyfriends, even strangers. But I do not feel shame for what happened, and telling my story is part of the feeling of empowerment and control that I now crave.

Rape can happen to anyone. My goal is to give hope and encouragement to other survivors of rape, so they understand that they should not be afraid to ask for help nor get discouraged if they reach some dead ends.

It has been a little over a year since I was raped. Some days are worse than others, but I grow more confident each day. I’ve reached a level of clarity that I never thought I could. What I experienced was horrible, but I am turning this trauma into a catalyst for change. I hope my story and my actions can help someone the way Linor’s story helped me.

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Group Discussion Questions

* How did Linor’s story help Dana when she was in crisis, just after being assaulted?
* Do you think it will be easier or more difficult (and why) for someone to get help overcoming a big obstacle after reading Dana’s story?
* How can you craft and create your story? *Writing, dancing, poetry etc.*
* Where are some outlets where you can share your story?
* Who can and will benefit from your story?