

help,
i'm
dealing
with
trauma

Real Talk, Real Encouragement,
and Real Healing

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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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This book often relies on the use of storytelling. It reflects the author's present recollections and information gathering of experiences over time. Most of the names of individuals or institutions and their characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated. Please also be aware that some of the language used can be coarse but is there in context and to recount actual events.

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Foreword

It is said that some people come into your life for a season, while others come into your life to stay. As such I have been truly blessed to have obtained a God-ordained authentic relationship with my brother beloved in the person of the Reverend Lemuel Blackett. For a decade or so, we have assisted each other, shared mountaintop moments, and cried through valleys below as we have navigated through higher heights and deeper depths in our personal and ministerial existence. Treading through storms and triumphs, we have gained a better understanding of accountability as we buoy each other up trying to remain as steadfast and unmovable in an ever-evolving world.

In accepting all his own naked truths, through raw and transparent literary composition, *Help, I'm Dealing with Trauma: Real Talk, Real Encouragement, and Real Healing*, Lemuel has taken a pause from his own life experiences up until this juncture, a childhood included, to articulate boldly and brashly through pen on paper a raw and transparent literary arrangement that a multitude of us struggling to just exist can relate to. He has taken the results of disdain, disappointment, discouragement, and defeat from witnessing domestic violence as a

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youngster, experiencing death of close family members, unemployment in the secular work force, loss of friends, an aversion of acceptance of mental health support, and rejections in the ministry of the Gospel of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who became the Christ, and has produced a written symmetry that cries out, "Help, I'm dealing with trauma!"

With the shifting of the paradigms in the economy, government, the world, ministry, and church as we knew it, Lemuel's calling and being chosen to minister against a plethora of adversities—and the very essence of trauma, not just as a word, but as a genuine and unquestionable reality—gives the reader very simply, an "I have been there, done that" approach, and they need not feel that they are an island unto themselves. Thus, trauma is undeniable, but one should bolster enough emotional control to face it head on when it occurs. And what we experience as trauma should not only be life lessons for us, but also examples, platforms by which we aid someone else on a traumatic journey. It is said in the Kingdom of God that unless you have been through something and reached the other side you cannot witness to another. Through "letting it all hang out," Lemuel has grasped his own theology, his own "God talk" and opened the floodgates of not only his traumatic experiences but also his own modus operandi of healing as he humbly and compassionately pours out painful yet therapeutic nuggets of wisdom to anyone and everyone as they delve into this writing.

In conclusion, I rejoice and have a newfound respect of my brother beloved as he has "let go and let God," having obtained the courage to amass the ability to tell this story. I have been blessed to accompany him through some of these personal accounts and it is my prayer that as others partake in this

reading, they receive the undeniable, profound, and deep riches of his testimony as he has become an overcomer by his written voice. This will encourage them to come out of the darkness and into the marvelous light!

Reverend Dr. Dawn Cherri Snell, MDiv, DMin

Introduction

trau·ma /'troumə,'trômə/ A deeply distressing or disturbing experience

I believe every human being has experienced trauma in some way. Traumatic experiences can distort your perspective. They can shape how you see the world, how you engage in politics, what religion you practice, the person you marry, and even the career path you choose. For instance, some people who have witnessed or experienced serious harm have chosen to become prosecutors or go into law enforcement. Others who have prematurely lost a loved one to a medical condition are inclined to become healthcare professionals.

Given the reality that trauma can influence the decisions we make in our lives, the way we respond to and manage trauma is incredibly important. This can determine whether we gain insight and grow stronger in the wake of a traumatic event or become mentally inhibited.

Unexpected tragedy can bring its own level of trauma. When you have planned how you will spend your day, week, month, or year and it is suddenly interrupted, it can be

traumatizing. For example, death, divorce, and layoffs can cause trauma. Sickness, the end of a friendship, or the dissolution of a business bring a level of trauma that is not easily manageable. Hoping that a new year brings new opportunities, only to be met with utter disappointment, is nauseating, to say the least. For example, many expected 2020 to be a year of possibility, of open doors, maximizing potential, travel, going back to school; the year of starting your own business, of trying something new, of turning dreams into reality.

For me, 2020 started off well. I ended 2019 with an extensive travel schedule and was excited to see what 2020 would bring. My wife, Kimberlee, was also preparing to pursue some of her own dreams in the new year. She had just begun her first semester for her second undergraduate degree in information technology and was laying the foundation to start a nonprofit that supported single mothers in minority communities. As for me, I had a full schedule of speaking engagements; my second book, *I Will Be Effective*, began gaining significant traction among churches; and I was offered a position as interim pastor at a historic church in Hartford, Connecticut. The first two months of the year were exciting, and I was making strides in my professional career. My friends and colleagues were also on the verge of major opportunities.

Then COVID-19 took over the world like a hurricane. What the novel coronavirus did to the world was deeply traumatic: school closures, job layoffs, devastated economies, home foreclosures, car repossessions, increases in child abuse and domestic violence, business closures, financial uncertainty, and food insecurities. And on top of that, we've experienced millions of COVID-related deaths worldwide, an ongoing

assault on the Black community at the hands of trigger-happy, racist police officers, and a vitriolic and divisive presidential administration under former President Donald J. Trump.

This uncertain and new reality has caused the hopeful to lose hope and the faithful to abandon their faith. Such pervasive and widespread trauma has fueled distrust of the government, social media, and traditional media outlets. Trauma has set the stage for mental breakdowns, a lack of buoyancy, and fear of the future. The traumatic events many of us have endured have taken root in and contaminated our hearts and minds.

In my own life I've had to deal with my own traumatic situations. I was born in London, England. I am one of four children. My mother was from Guyana and my father was from Barbados. That West Indian upbringing was very toxic and traumatic. I grew up around violence, betrayal, heartbreak, sexual promiscuity, deceit, and gaslighting. There was never a dull moment in my household or extended family. My parents never shared their feelings verbally, and if anyone else did, they considered that a sign of weakness. As I got to learn more about my family, I learned that their behavior was passed down from one generation to the next. Fortunately for me I was able to escape some of that dysfunction. However, many of my cousins and all my siblings continued in that same pernicious behavior. To be completely honest, some of those family traits have carried over into my adulthood. So, when I recognize some of that familiar behavior from my childhood creeping in, I make it my priority to tackle it instantaneously before it festers into an uncontrollable series of events. As a husband and father of three amazing children, I've done my very best to prevent what

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I've seen in my parents from affecting how I raise my children and interact with my wife. I've made it a personal mantra to refuse to mirror what I experienced growing up.

When I entered the ministry, I was warned it would be difficult and sometimes challenging, but I could have never imagined the number of scars I have from just trying to preach and lead God's people. The places that I thought would be safe spaces turned out to be hellholes. The sleepless nights and panic attacks were consistent in my everyday life. Every day was a new battle; every day seemed to get worse and worse until I made up my mind that this couldn't be what life is all about.

The good news is that I've discovered you can will yourself out of almost anything. Whenever I wanted something better, I spoke it, all day every day, until it came into existence. Does that work for everything? No. Will it work for most things you are trying to accomplish? Yes. Having a determined mindset can truly shift you from the negative to the positive. Optimism is my medicine; I take a dose daily. And what that does is reassure me that whatever I may be challenged with now will not always have a hold on me later.

For over a year now, to find purpose and wisdom in agony, I have used the time and space created by the pandemic to take inventory of my life. This has involved beginning to confront issues that have left deep emotional scars on my life. While I have caused harm and conflict that I must take responsibility for, others in my life have also harmed me. People in leadership positions in my life have failed to lead with integrity. Consequently, my vulnerability has been taken advantage of, my kindness considered weakness, and my honesty deemed

confrontational. I have also had moments where I recognized if I did not seek assistance for my trauma, the trauma would have devoured me. Self-destruction would have been inevitable, and vengeance surely would have been my drug of choice.

My family is important to me. I am blessed with a wonderful, caring, loving, and supportive wife. I have three beautiful children who keep me laughing and energized. I am truly blessed. What scares me, though, is that I may project my trauma on to my loved ones. As I have strived to be the best husband and father I can be, suppressing my trauma has become part of my daily life. While stifling certain feelings has allowed me to maintain a healthy and loving environment for my family, it has also been physically and emotionally exhausting and damaging.

I finally sought out a therapist in February 2020. This was not an easy decision. I had arguments with my wife about it. In the past, I had judged others who went to counseling. I thought, *Black people don't go to therapy, we have Jesus*. That was, until December 2019, when I attended a men's conference as a speaker and a therapist was also in attendance to speak to the men. I admittedly tuned out the beginning of his talk until he described being of Caribbean descent. He also said he only works with Black men. My resistance to therapy lessened slightly. After about two to three months of staring at the therapist's card on my nightstand, I decided to reach out to him.

He connected with me on a level that no one else has ever been able to. He understood my background. The way he described how Black men in particular deal with stress and anxiety and the unhealthy coping methods Black men tend to be drawn to really captured my attention. I sat there thinking, *This man has somehow gathered inside information about my life*. That

moment I made a decision that I needed to be his patient. It has been one of the best decisions I could have ever made.

Therapy has created a safe space for me to be vulnerable, transparent, and fully myself. I am so grateful that my wife encouraged me and that God allowed me to speak at that conference so that I could finally get the help I so desperately needed. Since seeing my therapist for over a year now, my marriage is stronger and my relationship with my children has been phenomenal. My life has taken a significant shift for the better, all because I have been able to do the continued work of dealing with my trauma of my family life, the losses I've experienced, and the difficult situations I've been in. I am so thankful for my relationship with God, and I am thankful that God put a wonderful therapist in my life.

I know it may be hard at first and you may have your reservations, but if you are serious about dealing with your trauma I would highly recommend seeking out a therapist who understands your culture. Make sure they can relate to what you are dealing with. The right therapist can help you change your life for the better. Alternatively, if you allow your trauma to go unaddressed and end up acting out of that unaddressed trauma, both you and your family will have to suffer the consequences.

Trauma can either be your launching pad or your detonator. My goal in this book is to share my journey in hopes it might support others in turning their own trauma into a launching pad to catapult them into their best life. Trauma is real. We can overcome it, but we must ask for help. Doing so is not a sign of weakness; in fact, it demonstrates courage to seek freedom from unbearable torment. You are not in this by yourself. You do not have to go it alone. This book is meant to help you

lower your walls and finally declare, “Help! I’m dealing with trauma!” In this journey called life we are faced with a multiplicity of traumatic events. I have had my own fair share of traumatic situations that caused me to have a distorted perspective on life. My church experiences have been unhealthy; my upbringing has been complicated, violent, and confusing. My relationships with friends and lovers were quite toxic. During those times I wanted and needed something that would say to me, *Lem, everything is going to be okay and life will eventually turn around.* I want you to know that though you go through trauma, life will ultimately get better and your trauma in due course will subside. Hang in there; remain optimistic, because you are better than all that you have been through.

The Trauma of the Past You Cannot Change the Past

I have a bad habit of revisiting what happened years ago and replaying it with an up-to-date director's-cut version. Have you ever thought, *If I could go back in time, this is the way I would have handled that situation* or *If I wasn't so unsure of myself, I would have spoken up?* I have rewritten parts of my life in ways where I came out the victor instead of the victim. I portray myself as the one who didn't back down but rose to the occasion in the defense of integrity and respect for others. In my remake of the story, I am not one to be messed with. But to be completely transparent, I must share the original version of what took place and how it sometimes prevents me from moving forward and letting it go.

I remember being around twelve or thirteen years old when I moved back to London from New York. I went to live

with my sister because I had been acting terribly in school. My mother thought it best that I finish school there and then come back to the States. I didn't want to go back to London but I made the best of it in the hopes of coming back to America.

One day after being in London for a few months, I was in my bedroom when I heard screaming and yelling coming from my sister's room. I thought I was hearing things, so I decided to tune it out and continue people-watching from the window. A few minutes later, however, the screaming became louder, and I began to hear the unmistakable noise of furniture being destroyed. I realized my sister's boyfriend was physically abusing her. I was horrified. I didn't know what to do. I thought about going into the kitchen to get a knife to stab him to death. I thought about kicking in the door like Mr. T would on *The A-Team* and whooping his ass like the punk that he was. Thoughts raced through my head, but I was afraid of what would happen. So, instead, I wrote a note saying "My sister's boyfriend is beating her up" and held it up to the window until someone noticed and called the police.

A few minutes later the police arrived. My sister answered the door. The police informed her there was a report of someone in the house being abused. She lied and said everything was okay. After some convincing, the police finally left.

That night my sister came to my room and we fell asleep together. I was angry I couldn't help her and even more angry that I didn't kill that bastard for harming my sister. The next morning my sister's boyfriend came into the kitchen like nothing ever happened. He tried to strike up a conversation with me, but I was clearly not interested in speaking to him. I had a

fork in my hand, and I thought about gouging his eyes out. I wanted him to feel pain like my sister did the night before. Thankfully, my sister and her boyfriend eventually broke up when she finally fought back and kicked him out.

I have been struggling with forgiving myself for not being there for her. Sometimes when I think about her, I think about that day and how I could have prevented the abuse. I start to think, *If only I were strong enough to fight him, he would have never, ever put his hands on her again.* Then I snap out of it and remind myself I was a child and there was really nothing I could do but call the police. In June 2009 my sister passed away from cancer. Not a day goes by that I don't think about her and the things she went through. My version of how I would have liked to deal with her boyfriend is very different from what took place some thirty years ago. The reality, though, is that I cannot go back. I must, therefore, move forward. While I cannot change the past, what I *can* do is think about all the other times I was there for her and be thankful for that.

Don't you dare mess with my mother!

My mother divorced my father circa 1983. They had a rocky relationship from the start, I am told. My father was unfaithful and had quite the temper. My mother is also a bit quick tempered, so they had a tumultuous, short-lived relationship. My mother told me she was warned not to get involved with the man who became my father. Several people warned her he was no good and only after her money and house. My mother even approached him about the things she heard, but naturally, he denied them. My mother told me she saw warning signs but

never really took them seriously; she just assumed everything would work out.

I'd like to pause the story here to suggest that if you hear things and notice red flags about someone you're interested in dating, you should consider being cautious about moving forward with that person. At the very least, you may want to explore the health and strength of the relationship before bringing children into the world. Many times, we get caught up in emotions but after the excitement of a fresh relationship wears off, we are left with someone who was only really drawn to what we had or what we could do for them and never really valued us. This can be traumatizing in that we gave our authentic selves to someone who never did the same. Don't ever lose yourself trying to fit into someone else's idea of who you are or *should* be.

So, back to my mother. She once told me that when I was about two years old she and my father got into a nasty argument. As they were going back and forth, my father went to punch her and I jumped off the bed and bit him on the ankle. My dad screamed out and said, "Tris"—referring to my middle name—"even you are against me?!" My response, as I am told, was "You better not touch my mum." As the story goes, he then tried to pick up our television to walk out with it, but I bit him on the ankle again. In my anger I told him to leave our TV alone and get out.

I'm not sure where I got all of that protective energy from, but I am glad it came in handy. I do wish I had that same fire when I realized my sister was being mistreated. Sometimes when you are faced with so much violence and live in fear it can drain your energy and prevent you from stepping into a

situation when you are needed. On the other hand, I am glad I was there to defend my mum even though she was more capable of defending herself in that moment.

Shortly after that incident, my father moved out. In a strange order of events, it was my mother who provided him with the down payment to get his own home. Of course, in true fashion, he didn't pay her back. My mother didn't have to loan him the money, but in her kindness and generosity she was still the bigger person. My mother has proven to be a strong woman who has overcome much adversity and trials but through it all she has accomplished much and is still standing.

Are my eyes deceiving me?

Just like any little brother, I always wanted to hang out with my older brother. He had a cool car, dressed real nice, gave us money when we asked, and bought my niece, adopted brother, and me whatever we asked for (within reason). You couldn't tell me anything about my big brother. In my mind he was the best big brother in the whole world. I would spend the weekends at his house and hang out there with my nephew. My nephew and I would play fight with my brother, and he would let us think we could beat him. I really looked up to him. He was my hero. But there is an adage that says, "Never meet your heroes." They will always disappoint you.

One weekend, when I was staying over at my brother's house, I was heading downstairs when I saw the most horrifying thing. I witnessed my hero, my big brother, punching his wife in the face. I had never seen anything like it. When he noticed me standing there, he said, "Tristram, get upstairs,

now.” I ran back upstairs and jumped back into bed. From that day I never spent the night at his house again. I never shared this story with anyone except my mother and I only did that once I was in my mid-twenties. What I saw that night was devastating. How could someone treat their wife like that? How could a man punch someone in the face? Especially a woman? That night I lost all respect for my brother; I hated him for years. I never wanted anything to do with him, and I made it obvious.

Thankfully his wife divorced him and got away from his abuse. As I got older my relationship with my brother became very strained because I couldn't get over the behavior I had seen from my so-called hero. Several years later he moved with us to the U.S. While living with my mother and I, he bullied me whenever he got the chance. That didn't last long because at that point I was older and no longer afraid. We would get into fistfights. Though I didn't win those fights, I made it known he was not going to take advantage of me because I knew who he really was: an abusive coward.

Over the years the fights got worse, and he eventually moved out. I haven't seen him since my early twenties, and the last time we saw one another, you would have thought it was the WWE Royal Rumble. My mother was thinking of moving to Florida, so my brother invited her down to look at a house. She didn't want to go by herself, so we decided to make a trip out of it. My sister Rae flew in from London with her then-boyfriend, and I, of course, was not about to miss out on a free trip to Florida. Everything was going well; my mother stayed with my brother and his girlfriend and my sister, her boyfriend, and I stayed at a hotel a few miles away. One day while we were at

Miami Beach my brother called me. He wanted my sister and I to come over and have dinner at his place.

The next day we went to my brother's and were greeted by his girlfriend. What was so unusual about the visit is that my brother never came inside to see us. After a few hours of making awkward small talk, I asked for something to drink. My brother's girlfriend told me to help myself to drinks on the patio. As I went outside to get a soda, I turned around only to find my brother sitting on a lawn chair. I asked him why he wasn't inside with the rest of us. He said he preferred to stay outside. To avoid an argument, I didn't ask any more questions. I told him it was good to see him, gave him a hug, and went back inside. A few minutes later my sister, her boyfriend, and I left and went back to the hotel.

On our final day in Florida, we went to pick up our mom from my brother's place on our way to the airport. My sister and her boyfriend stayed in the car while I grabbed my mom's bags. After I put the suitcases in the car, I went back to get my mom but she had gone to the bathroom. My brother was standing in the living room staring me down. I asked him what was wrong. He told me not to ask him any questions. Before I knew it, we started fighting. My mother screamed out, and that got the attention of my sister's boyfriend. He ran inside and tried to break up the fight but couldn't. After the commotion finally died down my brother screamed out to my mother asking why I hate him so much. I told him it was because he beats women and I couldn't stand him.

Everything I wanted to do when my sister's ex-boyfriend was abusing her and when I saw my brother hit my then-sister-in-law came rushing back. I wanted vengeance! I was tired of

letting people get away with it. After I told my brother he was a woman-beater, he simply looked at me in disbelief. I reminded him of what he did to his ex-wife and other women. My family eventually convinced me to get in the car and we drove to the airport. I can't remember what we talked about on the way to the airport; all I know is I was mad as hell and wanted to go back and finish him off. I haven't seen or spoken to my brother since.

Each day I pray to let my anger go and forgive him for his actions, and each day I feel a bit stronger. I'm not sure if I will ever see my brother again, but if I do, I hope it will be a cordial meeting.

Friend or no friend, I better not ever find out that you hit a woman!

The majority of people I know are from the church. As a matter of fact, one of my closest friends when I was about twenty-three years old was someone I met at church. To protect his and others' identities, I'll call him Mark. Mark and I had a few things in common: we love God, we enjoy singing in the choir, and most of all, we loved to chase the ladies. We would go on double dates, visit different churches, and go on road trips together. When you saw Mark, you saw me. The only person who knew more about Mark than me was his mother, and even then I think we were neck and neck in that department. Though I knew so much about Mark, there was something troublesome about him that caused our friendship to end abruptly.

Mark dated this wonderful young lady, Michelle. Michelle also attended our church and sang with us in the choir. Mark was not faithful to any of the women he was seeing at the time. I think they were aware of his unfaithfulness but never

brought it up. Michelle and Mark dated for quite some time; there was even talk of them getting married. They seemed very happy, and Mark stopped seeing other women, so we thought for sure this was it. One day, Michelle and I were in the choir room with another church friend, Derrick. I'm not sure how we got on the topic of Mark, but we ended up discussing Mark and Michelle's relationship. During that conversation Michelle informed us that Mark had hit her. You can only imagine the rage I felt. I'd already witnessed people I love being abused by their boyfriends and husbands. And now someone I called my closest friend was committing the same egregious act. When Michelle shared this information with us, I was stunned; I was downright pissed. I asked her if she was okay and when the last time was that Mark had hit her. She said it had been a few days prior. I told her we would handle it.

Derrick saw the rage in my eyes. I could not care less what Mark's excuse was. There is no excuse for putting your hands on a woman. When Mark got back to the church, Derrick and I confronted him. We offered to get him help if he needed it. His response shocked us both. He said, "I don't need you guys to Dr. Phil me, and the both of you need to stay out of my business." I became angry and got in his face. Before I could get any words out Derrick jumped in between us. Mark asked if I was going to fight him. I told him that if he put his hands on Michelle again I would.

Needless to say, Michelle and Mark broke up shortly after that. Our friendship also ended. I could no longer be friends with someone who abused women. That is where I draw the line.

I know I cannot go back into the past, but what I can control is my present and my future. Though I wish I had the wisdom and the strength to defend my sister and sister-in-law when I was younger, the fact is that I couldn't. I was too young to understand and too fearful to react appropriately. What I can do is make it my business to intervene when I see it happening. I can do things like notify the police when I see something that is out of the ordinary. Without getting too involved I know I can be there for someone who may not know how to get out of an abusive relationship. I am older, wiser, and stronger to defend those who cannot defend themselves.

Getting over the trauma of your past is not an easy venture. It will take time to fully recover. For me, every time a disturbing memory tries to invade my peace and progress, I remind myself this event has already run its course. There is freedom in knowing you cannot change the past but you can definitely create a better future. When I realized I had the opportunity to be better, I became better. Don't be a prisoner of history that cannot be reshaped. Instead, be the architect of a new beginning.

To all the women who have been abused and found relief, I commend your courage. To those who are being abused, you can get out of that relationship, and you can get help. Refuse to allow anyone to devalue you and strip you of your inner and outer beauty.

To the memory of those who have lost their lives to physical abuse, I wish I could have been there to defend you, yet I know God will bring justice to those who caused you pain. Rest in peace!

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To every author that continues to share their story, I am inspired by your dedication.

Lastly, to everyone that has experienced and survived trauma, I've written this book for us as a testimony that we are unstoppable.