

# LEARNING TO FLY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TRAUMA, TRANSFORMATION & MASCULINITY

By Benjamin Wagner

Maybe you feel on edge, or overreact with your colleagues, clients, or kids.

Maybe you feel like you're sleepwalking through your own life, detached and disconnected from your relationship to your family, friends, and yourself.

Maybe you feel isolated, agitated, and aggrieved or forgetful, foggy, and unfocused.

Maybe you have back pain, migraines, or digestive issues that no doctor can diagnose, and worsen when you're stressed.

Maybe it takes a few more drinks to unwind than it used to – something harder.

And maybe you play like it's all good, hiding from your colleagues, posturing for your friends, and diminishing it to your partner. But it gnaws at you when you lay awake at night.

Something's off. And millions of us are in trouble in a very real, very dangerous way.

A generation of men is suffering in secret and dying of despair due to unaddressed post-traumatic stress. The word "trauma" comes from a Greek term meaning "wound," and represents one that hasn't healed. It can be sudden and intense or develop over time through ongoing experiences. It may arise from events that happen to us, such as an overwhelming, emotionally disturbing, or life-threatening injury or accident. It can also stem from what doesn't happen, like not receiving the love, care, or support needed.

Post-traumatic stress (PTS) is the mind and body's response to life-threatening or deeply upsetting events. It can affect *anyone* who experiences violence, accidents, natural disasters or relational events like neglect, verbal or sexual abuse, grief or bullying – leaving them with overwhelming fear, helplessness, or hopelessness.

These experiences can rewire the nervous system, keeping it in a constant state of high alert. This leaves a person emotionally devastated and physically unwell. It can manifest as flashbacks, panic attacks, insomnia, chronic physical pain, and risky or destructive behavior. It may look like persistent sadness, lethargy, and hesitation to engage in meaningful relationships, or defensiveness, anger, and rage. And it increases the likelihood of developing mental health issues like depression and anxiety, which in turn can lead to substance abuse and suicidal ideation. The impact of post-traumatic stress is perilous. We've read the headlines.

A soldier loses a leg in a foreign war, then takes his life in the calm of his hometown.

A trucker careens through a 26-car pileup and is wracked by nightmares for years.

A young man is verbally ravaged by his abusive, neglectful father, then becomes the narcissistic, totalitarian ruler of the free world.

Most of us don't understand physiology of PTS or think that it applies to us. But it does. The impact of it is everywhere — beyond the headlines, true crime podcasts, *Lifetime* movies, and trauma porn — and its life-altering impacts affect us all.

But we've learned reams in recent decades. The landmark 1998 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study transformed our understanding of trauma's long-term effects, paving the way for research in neuroscience, epigenetics, and trauma-informed therapy, and deepening our knowledge of how adversity shapes brain development, health, and healing.

By the narrowest definition, 60 percent of Americans – 200 million of us – will experienced at least one trauma in our lives.<sup>1</sup> In the last twenty years, nearly 15 percent of U.S. adults experienced harm or the threat of assault, robbery, and rape.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, 3.8 million children aged 5 to 17 in the U.S. were victims of or witnessed neighborhood violence.<sup>3</sup> Childhood traumas in adult disorders alone is so significant that renowned traumatologist John Briere suggested that if dysfunctional parenting were taken into account for adult depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, the 1,120-page Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders would shrink to the size of a thin pamphlet.<sup>4</sup>

Paired with living in our chronically stressful world – news and tech overload, economic uncertainty, climate change and natural disasters, political polarization, social media noise, workplace burnout, global conflict, and community safety concerns – adverse stress has created a public health crisis. One study reported that more than 20 percent of U.S. adults suffer panic attacks.<sup>5</sup> As many as 75 percent of doctor visits are labelled “psychosomatic” (i.e.: a physical condition caused or aggravated by a mental factor such as internal conflict or stress).<sup>6</sup> As a result, we are suffering higher rates of chronic illness, mental health disorders, addiction, and premature death, accounting for billions of dollars in healthcare costs and lost productivity, and contributing to an increasingly dysregulated, dysfunctional, and dystopic world.<sup>7</sup>

Unexpressed and unprocessed, post-traumatic stress leaves many men feeling alone, defensive, and misunderstood. Research on masculinity and social justice revealed that most men agree with the statement that no one knows them well.<sup>8</sup>

And how could they? They barely know themselves, or who they are supposed to be.

On the one hand, the traditional masculinity of the “Alpha Male” – hypercompetitive, aggressive, and emotionally detached – is seen as unevolved and outdated. Harmful, hateful, and hurtful male behaviors are labeled “toxic masculinity.”

On the other hand, hypermasculinity rules the day, and the country. Barstool Sports Founder Dave Portnoy has built an empire around sports, gambling, and bro-culture, despite (or perhaps because of) his history of misogynistic remarks, bullying, and allegations of filming women without consent during sex. Donald Trump has forged a career on male stereotypes, projecting clenched-fist strength, spewing crude “locker room talk” while browbeating congressional and global leaders.<sup>9</sup> All weakness is to be ridiculed.

Instead of seeking help to deal with their trauma, American men white knuckle their mental health. Perhaps that’s why they are four times more likely to die from suicide – the second leading cause of death for men under 45.<sup>10</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), men are 2.5 times more likely than women to die from alcohol-related causes, and nearly three times more likely to die of drug overdose.<sup>11</sup> Men can expect to live six years less than women.<sup>12</sup>

It’s not hard to hide from our secret, shameful pain. We can just escape into Netflix, online shopping, doomscrolling, hustle culture, pharmaceuticals, drugs, alcohol, comfort food, algorithms and planned obsolescence. But our unconscious efforts to lessen physical and emotional pain with work, booze, sex and gambling doesn’t diminish the pain, it simply disguises and defers it. The real damage is caused by what we carry with us. By making the storms of the past present, trauma leaves us feeling chronically unsafe. It shows up in our body language, tone of voice, tension in the chest, and tightness of our jaw. We may relive a traumatic moment over and over at the grocery store, anywhere, as intrusive thoughts fill us with dread, inhibition, paranoia, and a wariness. We may be irritable or prone to angry outbursts, reckless or self-destructive. Or we disengage, remove ourselves from the swirling chaos around us.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) statistics track soldiers, cops, journalists, front-line responders, Black, brown, indigenous, and impoverished Americans, and puts them at the center of the bell curve. But the impact of unprocessed acute (war, natural disaster, accidents) and relational (neglect, absence or abuse) trauma impacts white, middle-class men, too, so often complicit in their privilege, silence and inaction. Along with “small ‘t’ trauma” – the chronic,

distressing, non-life-threatening events of everyday life like workplace tension, financial difficulties, and interpersonal conflicts – “big T trauma” can lead to substantial emotional and psychological dysfunction and disorder. Research indicates that the “day-in and day-out pounding of undermining influences,” such as relentless criticism from someone close, conflict with a colleague, or even the steady barrage of bad news, can inflict greater psychological trauma than a single catastrophic event.<sup>13</sup>

The impacts of trauma and chronic adverse stress have created a Manosphere rife with rage, risk, hypervigilance, paranoia, misogyny and violence that aids, abets, and furthers patriarchy and colonialism. “If we don’t transform,” Franciscan friar Richard Rohr warns, “we transmit,” passing our suffering onto others.<sup>14</sup> And we seem to be doing just that. Despite efforts to suggest otherwise (see also: mass deportation, Aurora, Colorado, “They’re eating the dogs,” etc.), American men perpetrate nearly 60 percent of violent crime and domestic terror.<sup>15</sup> National Institute for Justice research (recently expunged from the internet by the Trump administration) suggests that individuals who have experienced dire trauma are more susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism, since unaddressed psychological wounds can manifest as profound anger, isolation, or a perceived need to exert control.<sup>16</sup>

And though the word “trauma” is casually dispensed in our increasingly hyperbolic, wellness-oriented culture, few men know what it is or how to deal with it. And so, we suffer alone, try to cope with our shame in secret, and seethe with anger in public.

\*

So that’s where we are. But we can do better. We need to. If we’re going to make any progress toward a more inclusive, equitable world, we *all* need to do the work — *especially* the white, middle class, privileged “snowflakes” who have the resources to feel their feelings, work out their shit, and embody a new masculine ideal that is strong, smart, empathetic and kind enough to help others feel safe, too.

Men *can* heal from trauma and learn to manage life’s inevitable onslaught of challenges, and feelings. Through research and expert interviews — and serving up myself and other men as examples of damaged souls and, ultimately, healed ones — I’m going to explain trauma’s causes, symptoms, and impacts on individuals and societies, detail a path toward healing, and present a model of masculinity. This model is more Joe Torre, the former MLB CEO, mental health advocate, than Joe Rogan; more openly vulnerable actor Andrew Garfield than misogynistic troll,

Andrew Tate; and more Donald Driver, the former NFL wide receiver and community activist, than hyper-competitive, anti-intellectual, self-aggrandizing oligarch Donald Trump.

I get that it might seem difficult to muster empathy for white heterosexual middle-aged men enduring a mental health crisis. But the patriarchal norms that dictate we “suck it up” and remain the independent, individualist, strong and silent model of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Man is bad for everyone: ourselves, the people who love us, and society at large. We all need to heal to have a healthier, inclusive and supportive society.

Kids who were told “boys don’t cry,” grew up to be men who are unable to regulate our emotions. So we pop off, furthering a culture of conflict and escapism. THE ALPHA CURE will show men how their turbulent childhoods and toxic workplaces have shaped their thoughts, attitudes and behaviors — and made them into the walking wounded they are today. I’ll guide men on a steady, step-by-step progression from trauma to transformation, toward a deeper, simpler, more meaningful life. THE ALPHA CURE will help readers envision in themselves a new archetype for the American Man, where the best qualities of our shared humanity – love, compassion, empathy, vulnerability, and interdependence – are celebrated as strengths.

Structurally, I’ll start with an intro that hits the big picture points (similar to this Overview) that men are paying a painful price for their unhealed trauma, and they might not have a clue why they’re acting out, anxious and angry.

**Part One is about the “Alpha Syndrome.”** Several chapters focus on the causes of traumatic stress among this population of men: generational trauma, being kids of divorce, parental neglect, neighborhood violence and school bullying, escapism, work culture, toxic tech and the pressures of adult life.

**Part Two is about the “Alpha Cure.”** These chapters chart the path toward healing that are recognized by experts as a three step process: stabilization and safety, processing and mourning, and meaning and reconnection. I’m not a shrink, true. But I’m a documentarian who has spent years researching this subject and have become close with leaders in the field who will be included in this book.

The tone will be relatable and accessible while presenting the research. Men my age are looking for someone who understands their pain and conflicted sense of self. I will talk to them like I would my brother, best friend, or myself, with empathetic and realness. I’ll model open vulnerability by sharing how I’ve been affected by trauma throughout my life.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> [CDC, 2019, National Council for Wellbeing, 2022](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [U.S. Department of Justice \*Criminal Victimization Report\*, 2022](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [National Health Statistics Report, 2023](#)
- <sup>4</sup> Pete Walker *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 2013
- <sup>5</sup> [Journal of American Medicine, 2006](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Levine *Waking The Tiger*, page 44 1997
- <sup>7</sup> [Peterson C, Aslam MV, Niolon PH, et al. Economic Burden of Health Conditions Associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences Among US Adults. JAMA Netw Open. 2023](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [Equimuno, 2023](#)
- <sup>9</sup> [Politico, 2017](#)
- <sup>10</sup> Center for Disease Controls (CDC), 2022
- <sup>11</sup> CDC. 2020, American College of Neuropsychopharmacology, 2023
- <sup>12</sup> [Yan, Arias, Geller, 2023](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma & Recovery* page 92, 1992
- <sup>14</sup> “Adam’s Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation,” 2004
- <sup>15</sup> Government Accountability Office, 2023
- <sup>16</sup> National Institute of Justice Journal, 2024