

9 - Choose Love Forgiveness

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays. This month, though, we are releasing a new episode each week.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we'll come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to use today. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast to get notifications about future episodes.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: You will want to listen to the next four episodes in order as they will build on each other.

We're honored to have Scarlett Lewis with us this month. These four episodes may be a bit longer as there is so much to say about what Scarlett is doing to make the world a better place. Scarlett's our special guest this month, and she will be sharing her story of surviving and thriving one of the country's worst tragedies, Sandy Hook.

While she weaves in lessons that she's learned along the way and strategies that you can use in your own life to thrive even in uncertain times, she will share a powerful formula that can lead you to choose love in any situation, circumstance, or interaction. December is the month that the tragedy occurred, and we are blessed to have her with us. Her first two episodes were Courage and Gratitude.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Scarlett Lewis is an author, speaker, and founder of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love movement that offers no-cost social and emotional programming in schools, homes, and communities all over the world. Their mission is to offer a solution to the issues that our kids face in today's world and provide a path towards flourishing. Scarlett is the mother of Jesse Lewis, who was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School and left a message on their kitchen chalkboard that inspired the movement, Nurturing, Healing, Love.

Jesse is on the presidential shortlist for the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor for saving nine of his classmates' lives before losing his own.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Today, we are here with Scarlett to talk about forgiveness. Forgiveness is the gift that you give yourself. How it's important to forgive yourself is first, as it's the key to freedom that you will all carry in your pocket.

So, Scarlett, welcome.

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: Thank you so much.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: And thank you for being here. We appreciate your time so much.

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: Absolutely.

Thank you so much. It's an honor to be here with you, Stephanie and Tisha. And you know, forgiveness is so vitally important.

I didn't realize it before my son was murdered in his first-grade classroom at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I didn't think too much about forgiveness before that. I thought I understood it.

Growing up, I was taught that we forgive other people so that we're forgiven. And that's about all that I knew about it. And so, my journey really of researching actually what it meant and coming to understand it intimately myself and realize that it is one of the most incredible things that we can do to help heal ourselves and to release our personal pain.

So, Jesse left a message on our kitchen chalkboard, nurturing, healing, love. So, we're going through this formula. And the formula is courage plus gratitude plus forgiveness plus compassion and action equals choosing love.

And it did arise from Jesse's formula on his message on our kitchen chalkboard, nurturing, healing, love. So nurturing is loving kindness and gratitude. And healing literally means forgiveness.

And it is so vitally important. I never thought about it really before Sandy Hook. But what I did understand is that I did not want to be another victim of the tragedy.

I wanted to model for my then 12-year-old son what it looked like to move through and grow from this difficulty. And forgiveness was a huge part of that. When I came home and I found that message of nurturing, healing, love, I realized that if the shooter who had been a former student of Sandy Hook Elementary School and his mother had taught at the school, if he had been able to give and receive nurturing, healing, love, the tragedy would never have happened.

It seems so simple to me, but of course, simple isn't always easy. But I will tell you that that started me off by feeling compassion for him, compassion that he was unable to do that, with the understanding that hurting people hurt people. And I knew instinctively that he must have been in a tremendous amount of pain to do something so heinous.

And I actually did find out about his life. And I did understand that he had been isolated, abused, neglected, bullied pretty much his whole life. And so, I understood where that pain came from.

And by the way, I understood that he could have been fortified with skills and tools called social emotional intelligence that would have helped him manage that pain and actually even grow through it, which is my mission in life now. But that did help me begin my forgiveness journey. I knew that I did not want to be stuck in anger, hatred and resentment for the person who murdered my son.

I knew that if I carried that around with me, that I would be another victim of his. And I did not want to be another victim. And I knew really the only way that I could take my personal power back was through forgiveness.

And it was the best choice that I ever made. So, so powerful. And I was able to model that for my son and really model that for the world as well.

I've had a lot of people that have said, oh, my gosh, if you could forgive the man who murdered your son, then I can forgive whatever they're facing in their life. Forgiveness is really important. And I realized even within my own family, people that would argue with me on what forgiveness meant, because, you know, we say forgive and forget.

Right. And so, some people thought, well, you shouldn't keep talking about it because you have to just let it go, you know, like it never happened. That's forgiveness.

And I said, actually, forgiveness really isn't about forgetting because I will never forget. I carry with me Jesse every day. So, it's not about forgetting.

And then I got into almost an argument, actually, with a family member who said that forgiveness means that you can't hold the person accountable. And that doesn't make any sense because in some situations, in all situations, it doesn't mean that you don't hold the person accountable for what they did. We're all accountable for our actions and our inactions.

It literally simply means that you're cutting the cord that attaches you to pain and you're taking your personal power back. So, you can see, I mean, I've done a lot of research, but I've also been in very deep conversations with people that have not agreed with me on my definition of forgiveness, which is pretty interesting. But I do know that it is the most powerful choice that I could have made.

And it was a beautiful gift that I gave myself. People will come up to me and say, how could you forgive the man who murdered your son? And really with all that I know about forgiveness, I say, at least in my head, how could I not with all of the research that we have on the benefits of forgiveness? It's really amazing.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Wow.

Well, so you've really, really chosen your power and I love that. So, we are on episode three and you've really done a good job kind of over-viewing courage, gratitude, and forgiveness in this episode. But you know what I really think that our audience would benefit from is just telling us more about Jesse, telling us, paint us a picture of who Jesse Lewis is, was.

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: Oh, I love that. And thank you for asking me about Jesse. Jesse, I love introducing him like this.

I say that he was born 11 pounds. And the first time that I saw him, I, I, it was this, I had a C-section with him, and I walked to the nursery and all of these nurses were gathering around the window, taking pictures. And I walked up behind them and I said, what are you taking pictures of? And they said, there's this enormous baby.

Cause if you think about an 11 pounder next to like a normal six or seven pounder, it's a big difference. And they said, there's this enormous baby who has crawled down to the bottom of his bassinet and he's trying to crawl out. So that was Jesse literally less than 24 hours old, just determined to get out and start running around.

And really, he had that level of exuberance and passion and energy his entire life. He was just wise beyond his years. So much fun.

He was my little cuddle bug. So, every morning I would wake up early. I was a single mom.

So, I worked, I got up a little early to get some stuff done. And then Jesse would be the next person to get up. He'd shuffle down with his blankie, get on my lap.

We'd have some cuddle time. And then we would start getting everybody ready for school. And he rode horses.

He played outside in the yard with sticks and rocks. I mean, he was just an absolute boy. He loved wearing fatigues.

He wore an army helmet. And my philosophy in life is if you don't come home or if you don't come inside the house without dirty fingernails and you haven't had enough fun. I mean, we live on a little farm and there's plenty of opportunity around here.

All our dogs and chickens and animals to get dirty. And he absolutely did that spending most of his time outside. But at the same time, he had just a beautiful love and compassion for people and other kids.

He had friends that were two and three times his age because he was very mature for his age. really, really just an incredible little boy. And, you know, you said is or was.

And, you know, I feel like he still is because I feel like when we lose people that we love, the relationship doesn't end because love never ends. It just changes. And it's not the relationship that we want, but we just have to get.

And this new relationship, so I literally feel like I talk to Jesse during the day, I literally feel like he is helping me with the movement because he started it with his three words on the chalkboard, nurturing, healing, love. If anybody ever says to me, oh, wow, look at the Choose Love Movement. You guys are in 10,000 schools.

That's amazing. I always picture Jesse behind me tapping me on the shoulder going, mom, you know, that I put everything that you needed in your lap. You really didn't have to do a whole lot.

You just had to show up. So, I always say that like, OK, I can't take the credit. The credit really goes to Jesse because he started this and we still have a lot of fun.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: You know, Scarlett, and actually exactly what you said, I've heard you speak several times now, and I feel like Jesse is a part of my life, too. So, when I ask that question, it is exactly for that reason. And I just feel like he's really a part of this movement and us pushing forward with the message.

So, I really thank you for sharing him.

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: I love that so much. So, we have ambassadors in, I think they're now in 30 states.

And these are volunteers that help us spread the message. They're embedded within the states. And I've overheard them talking and I can't say this, but they say that they feel like they were recruited by Jesse and that they can do nothing but help spread the message.

They feel like, you know, he's pushing them to do that. And they also have the benefit of having Jesse, an angel in their life. And and they say that they think that he helps them, you know, with with issues that they face, too.

So, I love that you said that. Thank you for sharing that.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Scarlett, that just resonates so much with me throughout my life.

We've all had people who have been taken from us far too early. And thank you so much for sharing all of that. Even though I'm tearing up a little bit listening to you talk, I know that everyone wanted to hear about Jesse and who he and what he's done for you and so many.

Because, yes, I wanted to get to that Choose Love movement. That was my next thing. How you decided to do it.

Why it's such a big part of your life. And, you know, if people want to be a part of it, what can we do?

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: Thank you. Those are really important questions.

Well, you know, after after the mass murder where 20 first graders were murdered in two first grade classrooms and six educators, I knew that what had happened was 100 percent preventable. And, you know, we had Columbine 15 years earlier. And then we had Parkland five years later.

You know, it still continues to go on. And it's almost like we continue to do the same things over and over, expecting a different result. And I believe it's because we are focusing on the issues and we're not focusing on the cause of those issues.

I could not live my life knowing this without literally dedicating my life to reducing the pain and suffering that led to what happened at Sandy Hook because it could have been. So, I started this movement because well, actually, it's funny. I started the Choose Love Movement because I was going to fill in the gaps in our education system.

I knew and science, scientific research tells us that schools need to have a comprehensive yearlong social-emotional learning program. And when they do, there's so much science. First of all, we know it's the number one way to have a safe school because when you have a loving, compassionate, connected culture in the school, it can reduce and proceed a grievance.

And the grievance is what leads to an attack. And so, I knew that I had to dedicate my life to making sure that the schools that couldn't afford this programming, because by the way, the programming that's out there is very expensive. In fact, Sandy Hook Elementary School had spent so much money on one of these expensive SEL programs that they couldn't afford to train the teachers.

So, the program itself never got out of the box, which is another reason why I created this program, because I thought we know too much about these essential life skills. We cannot keep them out of any children's hands. We know they're a direct path to flourishing.

We know they need these skills and tools. Every child deserves access. So, I created a program that was extensive yearlong.

We call it Next Generation because it includes everything. And then I give it away for free. But I started out by saying, okay, I'm going to fill the gaps.

So, it's those schools that don't have the resources, they can't afford this, and here's a program for them. Little did I know that 90% of schools actually do not have a comprehensive social emotional learning program that's embraced by everyone. A lot of schools check off the box with week-long kindness programs or a speaker or a workshop.

But literally to impact the culture and to provide kids with these skills and tools for a lifetime, it needs to be within everything that they do. So, it went from filling in the gaps, which is where I started, to actually being a very significant presence in this industry of social emotional learning. And I believe raising the bar of what's out there and also helping with the awareness of the essential importance of getting this into schools, and not just schools, but homes and communities as well.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: So, Scarlett, as we close today, can you leave us with just three quick takeaways?

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: Absolutely. So, number one, forgiveness is a choice. You can make the choice today.

Even if you're not 100% all in, you can say, you know what, I don't want to be carrying around this anger and resentment around with me. I want to forgive. It starts with a choice.

And remember, number two, I want everybody to remember, it's not a gift that you're giving somebody else that hurts you, that's undeserving. The gift is for yourself. And I think that it's really important to remember that.

And number three, it starts with a choice, but then it becomes a process. Just because you choose to forgive doesn't mean that you're not going to fall back into anger. And it doesn't mean that you failed.

It just means that you have to forgive again.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Those are three wonderful takeaways. Can you leave our audience with one challenge?

Scarlett Lewis Speaker: Yes.

You know, like you said earlier, it's really important to start forgiveness with yourself. You think, well, wait a minute, I don't have anything that I need to forgive myself for. But in actuality, if you think about it, I challenge your audience to think about something that maybe you blame yourself for.

Something that happened in the past that you're holding on to blame for, even if it's not your fault. Sometimes things happen to us as kids. And we tend to blame ourselves and take on the blame, even when it's really not our fault.

And I want you to choose to forgive yourself. I want you to let it go. I want you to take your personal power back.

I want you to take that key that's in your pocket that is forgiveness. And I want you to unlock the prison cell that has been your mind. Let yourself out of that.

Free yourself. Just choose to forgive yourself. Let it go.

That is my challenge.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: And that challenge is accepted by me. And I hope that everyone listening will also accept that challenge.

We have one more episode of this four-part podcast, and it will be next week. And we will talk about compassion. Thank you so much.

And we will see you next week.