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230 — Healing From Childhood Trauma with Former NFL Player Reggie Walker

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four (soon to be five) books on mental strength. My newest book, 13 Things Mentally Strong People Don’t Do Workbook, goes on sale February 28th. But you can pre-order it right now so you can be one of the first people to get your hands on a copy. It's filled with mental strength exercises that will help you become the strongest and best version of yourself and it's available wherever books are sold.

Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week. Now let's dive into today's episode!

Today, we're talking about childhood abuse and how to heal from it.

While traumatic events at any point in our lives will have an impact on us, being the victim of childhood abuse can affect almost every aspect of your life, even decades later. According to the Children's Advocacy Center, one out of three girls and one out of five boys will be sexually abused before they reach age 18. 90% of those children who
are abused actually know the perpetrator. Abused and neglected kids are 11 times more likely to engage in criminal behavior as an adult, and 80% of 21-year-olds who were abused as children meet the criteria for at least one psychological disorder.

Despite those startling statistics, it's a topic that most people don't want to discuss. As a therapist, I see lots of people who struggle to talk about the fact that they were abused as kids. Some people are still protective of family members who abuse them. Others are concerned that nobody's going to believe them, and many people just don't want to stir up the things that they've worked really hard to avoid for so many years.

While all of those things can be valid concerns, our guest today shares how talking about his history of abuse actually set him free.

Today I'm talking to a former NFL player, Reggie Walker. Reggie was sexually, physically, and emotionally abused as a child, and he kept that a secret for most of his life. In fact, he says in some ways football saved him because it gave him a socially acceptable way to act out his anger. But he also engaged in some self-destructive behaviors like smoking and drinking. He eventually went to therapy, but he said that a one-hour-a-week appointment with a therapist wasn't enough. He checked himself into a residential treatment center so he could get more intensive treatment. After six years in the NFL where he played for the Cardinals, the Chargers, and the Broncos, he decided to step away from football. He pursued his master's degree in counseling, and now his mission is to help other athletes who are survivors of abuse.

Some of the things he talks about today are how he found the courage to talk about what happened to him, how he realized that so many other people could relate to what he'd been through, and the steps he's taking today to keep managing his mental health.

Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take! It's the part of the show where I'll give you my take on the strategies Reggie shares and explain how you can apply them to your own life. So here's Reggie Walker on how healing from childhood trauma will help you grow mentally stronger!

Amy Morin:

Reggie Walker, welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast!
Reggie Walker:
Hey, thanks for having me Amy. It's a pleasure.

Amy Morin:
Absolutely. I am always excited when I know that somebody who is in the limelight talks about mental health, then shares their own story. But I'm especially interested when I hear from an athlete because I think so many people hold athletes up on this pedestal and think, obviously they have everything all together otherwise they wouldn't have made it this far. You have to have a certain level of self-discipline and you have to do certain things in order to make it at the elite level. You have to definitely have a lot of mental strength to get there. But then when you come out and you share your story of, well yeah I struggled too. I think it gives the rest of us a little more insight into the fact that you can be both successful and hurting all at the same time.

Reggie Walker:
Yeah. It was a really odd place to be in, especially when it really hit me that I got everything that I wanted out of football and the situation in itself. That I had everything and I was my most miserable that I've ever been and all at the same time. I had everything, but I also was the most miserable I've ever been because when it came down to just myself and what really made me happy. I wasn't living that life and I wasn't doing things how I wanted to, and I was doing a lot of things for the wrong reason and it started to really take away from me after some time.

Amy Morin:
Can you explain that to us? What kinds of things were going on? Because again, in the limelight from the outside looking in. You look like you're probably this happy guy finally living your dream, amazing opportunities that you had that came your way. But what was going on, on the inside for you?

Reggie Walker:
Well, I suffered through mental, physical, and sexual abuse and that was basically... My whole goal was going to the NFL to be happy. If I get to this point, everything that I had suffered through, went through up to this point would make it all worth it. Going through all that pain, the trauma, it would make it worth it. But then when I got to that point and the only thing that was different was now I'm just a guy who's gone through a bunch of abuse and I just got a bunch of money now. Nothing really changed and in a lot of ways it really started breaking me down because then at that point, it took me a while to realize that I thought I was never going to actually be happy. It really hit me a ton of bricks like, if I had got to this point I'm not happy then nothing's going to make me happy. So then it kind of sent me into a real major depression.

Amy Morin:
I think a lot of people have that false belief that once I achieve X, Y, and Z, my life will be okay. But most people obviously don't ever make it into the NFL, but they just think if once I get out of college, once I get a real job, once I move up the ladder a little bit. That that's sort of the goal line and when I get there I'll feel so much better and even though I went through these hard things, it won't matter as much. But you had this to an extreme level of, I mean, being in the NFL has got to be the dream for so many people. Most people don't make it, you made it and then to think yeah, but I'm still not happy. What was that like for you?

Reggie Walker:
It was an odd place to be at, because on the outside everyone's telling you you're amazing, you're this, you're that, you're all these great things. Then on the inside you're just like I'm really needing some help right now because I don't know how on earth I'm going to actually find happiness for once. Trying to figure out that while I'm a parent, I have three kids, I have wife and I have teammates because I was a middle linebacker and you're the one who basically is the quarterback of the defense. So you got to make sure that your stuff is together each and every day to make sure that they will actually follow you in the huddle, and it was a constant balancing act. I remember I would be three people when I came home. I would either be happy-go-lucky, I loved everything.
Second guy was like, I hate everything, I can't even believe I'm doing this, I wasted so much of my life doing this. Or I would just be completely silent, and some days I would just go home and just cry my face off by myself.

I didn't want it to show to my family or anybody that I was really broken inside and I was trying to figure out how to put myself together. Eventually it just kind of got to a point where I realized I really need to step away from this and I need to go... If football's not the thing that's going to make me happy, what will? How can I go and do that? And that's when I started doing therapy more extensively. Then that's when I actually decided to go to a treatment center because it was absolutely necessary at that time.

Amy Morin:
Did you know that the reason you were struggling so much was because you hadn't healed these childhood wounds?

Reggie Walker:
Oh yeah. Definitely after I would say my second year... I talked about it a little bit to a girlfriend when I was a junior in college and then I'm good. I talked about it, I'm good, I'm healthy, you know what a lot of people do. Then as I started playing in the league it started coming out in other ways. I was drinking a lot, I was smoking a lot. I would really engage in a lot of... What's the word? Really dangerous activities. It was like I had to, it was trying to get this stuff out and I didn't know how to verbalize it. It wasn't until I really just, hey I need to retire from this and I stepped away and then I put my healing first and then that's when I did the treatment center stays.

Amy Morin:
Yeah, and I appreciate that you talked about going to a treatment center. I believe you said at some point you tried outpatient therapy and it wasn't enough for you?

Reggie Walker:
Yeah. Therapy wasn't enough, it just wasn't. I was 27 at the time, I hadn't dealt with any of the stuff internally well at all and I haven't talked about it. So I had to go do the 30
days, I had to go away from my family, I had to miss my daughter's birthday. I had to because I was so suicidal at that point that I really thought at that point time there's nothing that was going to make me happy at that point. So it was a scary place to be in.

Amy Morin:
I can imagine, and I'm glad that you talk about that because so many people will say, "Well, I go to therapy once a week or I went to eight therapy sessions." Then if they don't feel like they're getting better, then they think well I'm just too damaged to possibly get better. There's no hope for me, therapy doesn't work for me, and they don't dare try anything else. How did you know rather than just quit and say, okay this isn't work, there's no hope for me? How did you know that a better plan was to say, no I'm going to do something even more intensive as opposed to just walk away?

Reggie Walker:
Well, I had a buddy named Hamsa Abdullah. He actually had done a stay there before because they were helping guys get their benefits through the NFL, you could go see doctors there and he just told me about his experience. He said it was really great. I know that when you get done playing, you really need to go through this debriefing period where you need to get acclimated into regular life. He was just, "Go check it out. I'll hop on a plane with you." Because he knew I was doing really, really bad and he was just like, "If I got to hop on a plane with you, I'll take you down there, I need you here. We're brothers. I need you here." And I was like, "Dude, I don't want to go somewhere for 30 days. I can handle this. I'm strong. I'm a tough dude, you know me. I don't need to do something like this." And he was just like, "Yeah, you do bro and you know it."

And he was like, "You damn well know you do no, because you've never had to face an obstacle like this before which is really yourself. You've never dealt with yourself and this place they'll help you to do that, and they'll give you love of love and care and you'll be in a great spot. They got great meals, you'll be around other people looking for help trying to do the same thing you're doing." And he was like, "Yeah, 'cause the only way through it is really to sit in it." Yeah, that saved my life.

Amy Morin:
That had to have taken a lot of the stigma out of it to have somebody that you knew and trusted who said, yeah this is helpful. Because for a lot of people I think it's just like no, people who are really broken or you'd have to be really, really struggling to go to a place like that. That's not for people like me or I wouldn't want anybody to know. It's easy to hide therapy when you go for an hour a week, but if you're going to be gone somewhere for 30 days you probably going to have to come out and tell some people where you are. Right?

Reggie Walker:
Yeah. The thing is too, at first when I went I had the same thoughts of everybody that would probably go like, "Oh man, I'm going to a crazy house. I'm a crazy person now." And you're like no. Especially once you go and do it, you're like man this is actually a really good tool to have. It's being able to go and sit because it's so much therapy, it's so much therapy, and you're doing groups and you're doing individuals. But you're there with a whole army of people that are there to help you just get better and I felt like I would go again. I would still continue to go. It's a huge resource and the crazy part too... Well, I wont say the crazy part. But after going and doing the 30 days twice, it really hit me that a lot of people really need to do this.

If they have the opportunity to go and sit with yourself for 30 days and get out all of your crap and a group of other individuals doing the same thing. It could be probably the most life-changing experience you'll ever have in your life. Yeah, so I was very thankful for that.

Amy Morin:
I can imagine, and as a therapist I see people it's like an hour a week usually for treatment. But there's only so much you can cover in an hour a week and they go back out into the real world and something happens, they come back the next week. Sometimes it's really hard to really dig deep into old issues and childhood wounds and people are like I stir it up for an hour a week and then I go home. But to be able to do it for just 30 days straight, I would imagine on one hand maybe that's scary too. To think,
gosh I have this box that I've kept closed and now I'm going to open it up for 30 days straight. Was that scary at all to think about that?

Reggie Walker:

It was beyond scary. It was beyond scary because you knew that there was something underneath it all that you had been avoiding like the plague for your whole life. You knew it was there and I still remember when I sat on the couch, when I first got there and I did my intake. The lady Mary, she looked at me and she was just like, "You're scared out of your mind, aren't you?" And I was just like, "Hell no, look at me. I am not scared of anything." And she was just like, "I'm looking at you and you are scared." And I was like, "Yeah, I'm petrified." I'm absolutely petrified, and the whole process in itself too. Yeah, it is scary and yeah it is painful too. It's very painful. Knowing why you do what you do and the root of it and then trying to dig some of this stuff out, it's a very painful process it can be. But it is a very necessary process because afterwards now I know that I'm actually myself now.

I'm not portraying and I'm not wearing a mask. I'm not somebody else that I'm trying to be like, I'm trying to be like me and I'm always me all the time. I wouldn't have never got to that process if I didn't do the treatment center stays for sure.

Amy Morin:

So did you go 30 days and then get out for a while and then go back for another 30 days? Or did you do a couple stays back to back?

Reggie Walker:

I did 30 days and then went back two years later and then did another 30 days. The first time I basically had to get pushed on a plane, the second time I just went myself. Because even the 30 days the first time, I still felt like I didn't get it all out enough. So I decided to go back again to sit back in it again and it was a great decision.

Amy Morin:
Interesting, 'cause I think a lot of people once they open that box they talk about it, then they think, well I'm healed and even if they don't necessarily feel it. They're afraid to then say, actually I'm still struggling or I need to get more help for this. Because we want so desperately to say whatever it is we did worked that we then don't want to admit, well I'm still struggling a little bit over here.

Reggie Walker:
Yeah, it's a management type thing. Your mental health is just as important as your physical health, and it needs to be managed similarly. So that's something that I had to understand because the first time I went, I thought okay I did my 30 days I'm healed. I'm good, everything's good, don't need therapy anymore, don't need any of this and then I didn't manage myself enough. So then I went the second time and then ever since then I've managed myself and understood that, okay this is a constant thing. I got to do things that are going to actually help me be healthy. Got to have a morning routine, got to eat healthy, got to talk about my emotions and feelings and get this stuff out. Got to surround myself with better people. It's a constant thing that you have to do if you really want to maintain your mental health and I just didn't know that. I just didn't get it the first time.

Amy Morin:
I'm glad that you said that because I think our mental health system hasn't worked the same way as our physical health system does. You go to the doctor, maybe you get a checkup, you get medication or the doctor makes recommendations. But with the expectation that you'll eventually go back to the doctor, whether it's just for your next annual checkup or you'll go back to see how things are working. But in the mental health system we've waited until people are really quite sick, and then you make an appointment with a therapist and your insurance might say you can see them a handful of times and then that's kind of been it. Now I think the door is finally opening where we're like, maybe it's good to check in with a therapist regularly. Even when you're doing well or if you check in with somebody on and off throughout your life, you don't have to wait until you're so depressed you can't get out of bed or until your anxiety's so
bad that you can't work anymore. It makes more sense to use it as preventative medicine too.

Reggie Walker:

100%, and it should be used as a preventative medicine too. Because just like you said trying to just like, "Man, I'm good. I don't need to do this." No, you got to manage this constantly. It's the constant management, a balancing act usually and that's the reason why I had to go back the second time because I didn't get that. Now that's what I started to do with having the routine, eating right, working out, going on walks, doing things that you know actually feed into you on a daily. Not just when you feel like it or everything's going up or everything's bad, you do the same thing every day and having that routine has been a really helpful thing and managing myself too.

Amy Morin:

How has life gotten better for you? What sort of things have changed since you've gotten help?

Reggie Walker:

Well, I wrote that book. I wrote that book the Game Within the Game, and that took me three years to write it and I was in such a bad emotional state. It took me forever to just get it done and then I finished that course that's based off the book, and I got that college accredited which was a feat in itself. So I was like man this is dope, I have PhDs look through my stuff and there's like this is good and then actually I would say the biggest accomplishment is probably just being there for my kids.

Amy Morin:

Yeah.

Reggie Walker:

Because there was such a period of time where it is just like I couldn't be there for anybody, I couldn't even be there for myself. So just being able to be a father and be a friend and be there for people again, I would say that's even bigger than anything else.
Amy Morin:
Where would you be right now had you not gotten help if you had to say?

Reggie Walker:
I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be here at all here, point blank. I know for sure I wouldn't be here.

Amy Morin:
Wow. I've heard you say that being a football player was like this socially acceptable way for you to get out your anger and aggression. But for people that don't play football, I suspect a lot of them have committed crimes, assaulted people and they end up in a lot of legal trouble because of their anger and aggression from unhealed childhood wounds.

Reggie Walker:
That was actually a big reason why I wrote the book and started even talking about a lot of the traumas I went through. Because when I actually started getting more comfortable with just saying what happened to me when I was a kid. The first people that I spoke to about that were other football players, and the thing that I remember every time that I told them my story about being abused. They would always tell me, "Yeah, the same thing happened to me. Same thing happened to me. Same thing happened to me." And I always made sure I always ask, "How many times have you said this to anybody?" And every single answer was like, "This is the first time." Then I go and go on my healing journey and get myself fixed... Well fixed in a way. Managed. I could remember those guys, if I had to go through all of this pain to just get to the point of just being able to be here and I know you guys aren't even talking to anybody. Man, that's a lot of ticking time bombs I'm sitting here thinking is just walking around.

Because dude, when you're living with that much pain and you're not talking to anybody about it, and then you can just hide behind this mask of being a super tough, big, strong dude, who can't be touched, you're invincible. It's such a unrealistic way to walk through life.
Amy Morin:
Yeah. I think it happens so often that people don't know that the symptoms that they have are related to something awful that they went through decades ago. So they're irritable, they're angry, they're upset, or even parents will come in and they really don't have patience with their kids. Or people say I blew up at my boss at work and I don't know what's wrong with me and a lot of times it's just because they're holding onto something and they've tried to suppress it so much and they've never dealt with it, that eventually things bubble over.

Reggie Walker:
It definitely comes down other ways that's for sure. It's the thing I had to realize about getting help, is the more that I try to suppress this the more that it came out in other areas. I'm drinking a lot, I'm smoking a lot, I'm eating a lot. I'll eat all my feelings away, whatever, whatever the thing was it always comes out in other ways and that's the thing too why I like to share my story. Because I know that if I can just help people understand that this is going to come out in another way, just go to therapy, go to a treatment center if you need to, go talk to someone and go get the help so it doesn't come out in a way that really sets you back forever.

Just like you said I know that a lot of people who have gone through the abuse that I've gone through, they usually go and hurt other people. There's a lot of people that are in jail, there's a lot of people commit crimes, a lot of people just hurt other people. So football was a saving grace for me because I could go and hurt as many people as I wanted to and it was encouraged.

Amy Morin:
Right.

Reggie Walker:
It was also a saving grace because I couldn't verbalize anything. So I could verbalize it with my fist, but I just couldn't do it with my words and it took years to get to that point.
Amy Morin:

What was it like the stress of carrying around a secret if you really didn't tell anybody? Did you feel like you were different? A lot of times people will talk about the shame that they carry around because nobody knows that this thing happened to them. Did you get relief just by talking about it in the first place?

Reggie Walker:

It was a process, at first I was super scared. I felt dirty, I felt little, I felt like gross about it and that was like this is my worst secret. This is the thing that I don't want... I was going to take it to the grave. Then the thing that I realized about it is if I don't say anything to somebody about this, it's going to eat me alive. Because this is already eating me alive, not verbalizing it and then the more that I've talked about it the easier it became. Until now I can talk about anything that happened to me and it doesn't phase me at all. It doesn't make me worried, it has no power over me like it used to.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, that's the thing. I think when we suppress something and we think then it doesn't have any power over us, but the more that we hide something it's the opposite. It's the more power that, that has because it takes up so much energy to try to keep something like that a secret.

Reggie Walker:

100%.

Amy Morin:

Did you get diagnosed with PTSD or depression or anxiety?

Reggie Walker:

Yeah, I've been diagnosed with all three.
Okay. Which is fairly common for people that go through childhood trauma and then it often comes out like we said, in lots of different ways. In relationships, through somebody's work and how they take care of themselves and physical illnesses. People who tend to get more physical illnesses, often we talk about childhood stress and they're like, "Yeah, actually I've been through a lot of stuff."

Reggie Walker:
Oh yeah, I used to have a tick. I didn't notice it until after I did EMDR which was absolutely phenomenal by the way, absolutely phenomenal. But I didn't realize I used to have a tick because anytime I used to think about stuff that happened in childhood I would just start ticking. But it looked more like when someone gets a cold chill and they just kind of shake it off. That's how it showed, so I just thought it was a cold chill or something. But then once I did the EMDR the tick went away.

Amy Morin:
Interesting.

Reggie Walker:
Yeah. I didn't notice it, I know no one else noticed it and I didn't notice it until way after the fact.

Amy Morin:
Did you know at the time, did you have any idea that it was related?

Reggie Walker:
No, not until... Because it became very clear I think maybe a week after that. Because I would always have this tick and I'd always do it, and it always just looked like it's just chilly outside, but it's 100 degrees outside. Yeah. No it took me a while, probably after the first week.

Amy Morin:
Wow. Isn't that fascinating? That link between the body and the mind that so often we
don't recognize and those little ways that sometimes our unhealed emotional wounds
come out in terms of our physical ailments or illnesses or even something like a tick.

Reggie Walker:
Yeah, and I didn't even notice it for years.

Amy Morin:
Wow.

Reggie Walker:
Didn't even notice it.

Amy Morin:
So for somebody who's going to say, yeah but I don't want to open Pandora's box I've
kept it hidden for all these years. That I'm afraid if I open that box I might make things
worse, like I don't dare go there. What would you say to somebody?

Reggie Walker:
I would tell them you have to go there, you have to see who you really are before you
die. That's how I thought about it, was I want to see myself in the mirror for the first time
for what I actually am. For better or worse, I just want to see what it is and yeah it was a
painful journey, and yeah you do have a lot of bumps and bruises along the way and
that's okay. Because ultimately you finding yourself, really now you give yourself that
chance to actually be happy and content and peaceful in the world. But you got to go
find yourself first and find out what really makes you happy, what really makes you
come alive in the world and sitting in yourself and sitting in your pain is the first step in
doing that. But it does get better. It hurts a lot at firs, and then after a while it starts
going down and down and down and down.

It's just riding a bike and it doesn't have the power like it used to, you just got to keep
talking about it and keep dealing with it. But yeah, there's why I'm a big fan of therapy,
I'm a big fan of the treatment centers. I'm a big fan of EMDR, I'm a big fan of just getting help. Yeah. So that's why I try to say it as often as I can.

Amy Morin:

Another big concern I'll hear from people and even after they start to come to therapy is they're afraid of telling anybody what happened to them when they were a kid. Because maybe their parents perhaps should have known and didn't notice, or maybe it was a family member that abused them and they're like, I can't go back and stir up all of these old wounds if I tell anybody now or people are going to question me. They're really afraid about revealing it to anybody who knew them when they were a kid for one reason or another. What was your experience with that? Did you do people now who knew you as a kid? Obviously you've made your story public, so people must be aware that this happened to you even though they weren't aware of it at the time.

Reggie Walker:

Yeah, it wasn't what I thought it was going to be at all. I thought that when I share my story everyone's going to look at me like I'm gross or I'm an other or I thought they were just going to look at me like I'm filthy. Like I'm just a filthy animal or something. But it was quite the opposite, people were very supportive. It actually helped me too, because I had people reaching out from the Middle East and Canada and all across the world basically disclosing to me that the same things happened to them and I was able to help them with my story. So that's a great thing to know that you people have welcomed me, it has not been what I thought it was going to be. Yeah, there's certain people too that might look at you differently or treat you differently. But for the most part I would say that people have just been more supportive.

Amy Morin:

Has that been the case not just with strangers who've heard your story, but with friends and family too?

Reggie Walker:
Yeah, definitely. Yeah. Because the thing is too like I told you with the football, it helped me actually form tighter bonds with people. Because they've gone through a lot of the same things that I've gone through, and they know that they can talk to me about it and they know I'm going to actually know how it feels to walk around with this stuff on you. I get it, and we all want to be heard and listened to and have people to understand us and understand the opinion that we've been sitting in. So yeah, I try to just do that as often as I can.

Amy Morin:
A lot of people will tell me, well talking about it isn't going to change it so why do I have to talk about it? What would you say to somebody who says that?

Reggie Walker:
It will change it. The power that it has over you will dissipate the more and more you talk about it. Dude, I had a tick. It would bother me so much I had a tick, and then I finally started talking about it and now I don't have a tick anymore. Now I can just talk about it and this was something that I was going to take to my grave, no one was going to know this about me. No one was going to know I got sexually abused, that I got abused, that period that I was traumatized. No one was going to know that, I was going to keep my strong man look on mask the whole rest of my life and when I started talking about it that power started releasing. Then now I'm fully myself all the time and that's something that I never thought I would be able to do. Plus, when it comes to being happy now I know that I can actually find happiness within my own self without even trying to do anything outside of me.

I can find it right here and I did not have that before because the only thing that was in here was trauma and pain and regret and remorse and just all this negativity.

Amy Morin:
You have a fairly tangible example, yeah a tick went away. Most people won't ever have that to be able to say, actually here's the change I saw. People say I feel differently but you can't really see it. You have something that the rest of the world could see, a before
and after of before I started talking about trauma and after. Obviously you're proof that talking about it won't change the past, but it can certainly change how you respond to that traumatic event that happened to you.

Reggie Walker:
Yeah, and it could change your future too.

Amy Morin:
Yes.

Reggie Walker:
I can't even imagine where I would be if I never said anything about this. But also too the amount of people that I've been able to relate to and help because I've opened up my story and being able to form that bridge of understanding between me and someone else that is a complete stranger. But they know that same pain that I know, and I have more fulfilling relationships because of that. It's not surface level, it's all deep, this is stuff that I wanted, that connection that I've wanted. I can finally have that now.

Amy Morin:
Yeah. Because I would imagine before all of your energy went into just defending yourself from getting hurt again or from allowing anybody to get too close or from knowing your story, and now it's kind of the opposite. You're welcoming people to you, you're sharing stuff that you buried deep down. But suddenly it's like you can play offense in life, it's not just defense against making things worse. But you can actually say, what do I want to do to make my life better?

Reggie Walker:
Right, and you can actually be on the front lines getting that done yourself, doing it yourself. I couldn't do that before. I didn't even know what I wanted or why I wanted it or who I was or what I wasn't and when you're trying to form a connection with another individual, you got to know those things and I couldn't form those connections like I wanted to until I started dealing with my stuff. Like we said, it is a painful process but it
is something that you can do. I've done it, thousands of other people have done it. I'm not the only one, there's a lot of people that have done this. It is very possible, it is very painful at first but it does lessen its power over time the more and more you do it. It's not like you go in there your first day and it's going to have the same effect if your last day talking about this stuff. No, it definitely releases its grasp after a while. So I would highly encourage people to go talk to someone.

Amy Morin:
As part of your treatment, did they teach you coping strategies? How to deal with those uncomfortable emotions too?

Reggie Walker:
Oh yes, they did. Because I had no coping strategies up until that point, I had none. Plus too being an athlete you don't have any time, and then the name of the game is the more that I can put into this sport the better it is for me. So even when I'm not there I'm still watching film, I'm working on my body, I'm working on getting healthy. I'm doing all these necessary things to put as much into this one opportunity that I have as possible. So when I retired and left the game, I realized I didn't have any positive coping mechanisms. My thing was I would go home after the game I'd drink or I'd smoke or I'd sleep all day or I'd play the video games. But that was it, I didn't have anything that I would do. Now it's like I'm a big walker, I walk all the time. If I can walk anywhere I'll just walk there. Big walker, I meditate, I do yoga.

I don't do yoga as often as I should, but I still do it every now and then. But the meditating, the walks, positive affirmations, journaling, and actually doing the things that I like to do like reading. I love reading. I love sitting down and just doing things that I know feed into me. Yeah, I had to learn that in the treatment center though.

Amy Morin:
Good. Because I think a lot of people will say, well if I just walk in there and share my whole story well then what's the point? But hopefully a good treatment center, a good therapist will help you figure out how do you take care of those emotions in a healthy
way. How do you recognize when your anger is going up so that you can catch it before you explode. How do you figure out what skills and strategies are going to work so when you're sad you can take care of those sad feelings without becoming self-destructive.

Reggie Walker:

Oh yeah, because I've definitely 100% even after the two treatment centers stays I've had definitely bouts of depression. Because stuff happens and it sucks, and some things hit you harder than others but now I can actually dig myself out of it. Before I couldn't dig myself out of it. I would just mull on it and just dwell and dwell and dwell and dwell and dwell and dwell until I was about to pop. Now I know, okay one foot in front of the other, go brush your teeth, get out of bed, go for this walk, now go get something to eat. I know the steps that I can take if I ever get to that spot and I wouldn't have learned that if I didn't go to the treatment center.

Amy Morin:

So one last question for you. For somebody that says, yeah but my life's really busy, it's hectic, it's chaotic, I have responsibilities. I don't have time to start talking about this stuff or to open that box and finally let it out. What would you say to that person?

Reggie Walker:

You can find time. You find time to do everything else, go to the gym, read this, sleep more hours than you can. You have the time and it's just the fact that you know that you going through that pain is going to be a hard experience. But that hard experience will show you to you, it will make you, you and it will make you be able to live a much more fuller and rich life than you ever could before. You just got to sit in that pain for a while and you stay in that pain you'll get there, and just watch and see how your life will change because of that. Better relationships, better relationship with yourself, better life. You're living a better life, you know exactly what you want. You're walking in purpose every single step of the way now because you've already sorted out all the crap. You know exactly who you are. You know exactly what you're not, you know exactly the type
of relationships you want and what you want to go towards in life. That's a beautiful thing that therapy can really help you understand about yourself.

Amy Morin:

Well Reggie Walker, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us on the Verywell Mind Podcast.

Reggie Walker:

Not a problem, thanks for having me. It's been a blast.

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Therapist's Take! This is a part of the show where I'll break down Reggie's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three of Reggie's strategies that I highly recommend!

**Number one: pay attention to any risky behaviors that you might have.** Reggie said he noticed that he had some risky behaviors like drinking and smoking, and he thought those things would help him cope. But he realized they were doing more harm than good. His experience with risky behavior, though, was fairly common. There are a few different explanations or theories about why childhood abuse can sometimes lead to risky behavior. One is that people who go through scary things actually become scared of nothing after a while, so they become somewhat reckless. There's also the idea that childhood trauma impacts brain development in a way that causes people to perceive risks differently. Another theory is that people who have experienced trauma during childhood might feel numb, and risky behaviors actually help them feel more alive. But if you're doing risky things like abusing substances, having unprotected sex with multiple partners, or even engaging in extreme sports, it could be a sign of several different things like untreated mental health problems. But it also might be a sign that you haven't yet healed from childhood trauma. Obviously, if you engage in risky behavior, you're gaining something from it. Otherwise, you wouldn't do it. Doing risky
things doesn't make you a bad person, but it might be important to get professional help to assist you in finding healthier ways to get your needs met.

Number two: talk to someone. Sometimes we think that shoving something down and never talking about it means that it doesn't have any power over us. But the more we try to pretend something didn't happen, the more effort we have to put into keeping it a secret, and it actually begins to take over our lives in some unexpected ways. That's why it's important to talk to someone. In Reggie's case, he first talked to the pastor at his church. From there he started therapy and then went to an inpatient facility. He says telling his story has kept what happened to him from controlling his life. Talking to someone is tough, and telling your story takes a lot of courage. But finding someone to talk to might be the key to helping you heal.

Number three: keep working on your mental health. I like that Reggie said he's a work in progress and that he's continuing to work on his mental health. Quite often people think that they're either mentally healthy or not. But the truth is mental health is a continuum, and where we fall on that continuum shifts from day to day or even moment to moment. There's some things that you can't control about your mental health, like your biology or some of the things that have happened to you. But there are other things that you can keep working on, and I like that Reggie shared some pretty simple things that he does to manage his mental health. Like he says, establishing a routine for himself and doing yoga makes a big difference in his overall wellbeing. So it's important to monitor yourself sometimes and ask what you're doing to manage your mental health. Reading a book for a few minutes every day, going for a walk, calling a friend, or just doing something that you love are examples of things that might improve your mental health. Think of those things like an investment, and the more you do those things, the better you'll feel, and the less you'll be affected by those inevitable bumps in the road that life's going to throw your way.

So those are three of Reggie's strategies that I highly recommend. Pay attention to any risky behaviors, talk to someone, and keep working on your mental health. To hear more from Reggie, check out his TEDx Talk, it's called “A Reflection on Part of My Life.”
If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share this show with them! Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger. Do you want free access to my online course? It's called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.”

To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course!

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast! And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who is a Tampa Bay Buccaneers fan), Nick Valentin.