

Me, enough?

A sibling's story of becoming free of guilt and shame

Author: Katherine Hill



“I was in a house fire. I was there too.”

I was 29 years old the first time I recall speaking those words, the first time I truly accepted their meaning and implications. The narrative I shared became a story that I became detached from. The story had always been “My sister was burned in a house fire...” Sometimes I would say I was also in the room during the accident. But I never said, “My twin sister and I...”

I spent most of my adult life unable to make sense of my experiences of living through a childhood house fire and the aftermath. For years, I asked myself, “What is my story in all this?” It felt as though my story never seemed to matter, because I wasn’t the one with the scars. I minimized my experiences because I had to in order to survive.



My sister, Michelle, and I were only two years old when the accident happened. Despite being so young, surgeries and complications were seemingly never-ending. When I became a teenager, I began to live in a state of constant “flight.” Anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and perfectionism fueled by toxic shame left me with feelings of worthlessness that soon began to control my life.

No matter what I did to please, perfect, and perform, my constant self-judgment left me feeling never enough. I felt that nothing I did could make up for or take away all the pain and suffering my sister has endured. This began to affect my quality of life by diminishing my self-esteem and confidence. I had difficulties in school and social settings due to the overwhelming fear of not being good enough. Gradually, I began to learn that my negative thought patterns were the biggest barrier to me reaching my goals, living into my values, and fulfilling a purpose-driven life.

I lived in this state of flight until my freshman year of college, when my body began to “freeze.” Symptoms ranging from headaches, pain, fatigue, weakness, poor sleep, brain fog, and stomach issues had me convinced that my body was failing. My body constantly competed with itself, easily triggered back in flight, followed by a crash or freeze. The crash was difficult to cope with and was often when my vicious inner critic would come lurking. Slowly, I began to realize my symptoms were a much-needed message from my body. A message that I didn’t have to run from the fire any longer.

Gradually, I learned to listen to the message my body was giving me. My trauma left me unable to let go of the past and fearful of the future, constantly on guard for the next threat. This caused me to become disembodied, unfamiliar with and easily overwhelmed by the sensations in my body.

I began by cultivating mindfulness, where I practiced noticing my thoughts, sensations, and feelings with curiosity and non-judgment. Diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing exercises in addition to gentle yoga stretches helped me regain a sense of comfort in my body. I learned to focus my awareness and breathe through unpleasant sensations, including pain, tension, and discomfort. This taught me how to make peace with these sensations and notice its connection with my emotions.

Giving into the core belief that “I’m not enough” would likely sink me into severe depression. I began to challenge this belief system and combat my inner critic that judged and demeaned me into cycles of shame by learning self-compassion and using mindfulness skills.

By cultivating mindfulness, I learned self-awareness, learned to live in the present, and became better at coping with uncomfortable emotions. I learned to be kinder to myself by noticing self-judgment and aimed to treat myself with the same kindness that I would treat a close friend or a child by giving myself grace. I sought to understand my triggers for shame by noticing my negative thought patterns and challenging these thoughts by reality-checking them. ”

Shame and fear of being judged would often diminish my ability to foster meaningful connections. The voice in my head told me I was unworthy of love and belonging. As I learned self-compassion, I developed friendships where I felt heard, seen, and valued. Friendships where I didn't feel judged, where I felt loved, just as I am, and could show up as my authentic self.

My confidence began to grow, I began to find a sense of purpose, and I learned how to advocate for myself. I accepted that suffering is a part of the human experience, our common humanity. Everything in life seemed to fall into place. I had attained my dream degree, dream job, and started a beautiful family.

Yet I still couldn't make sense of my story.

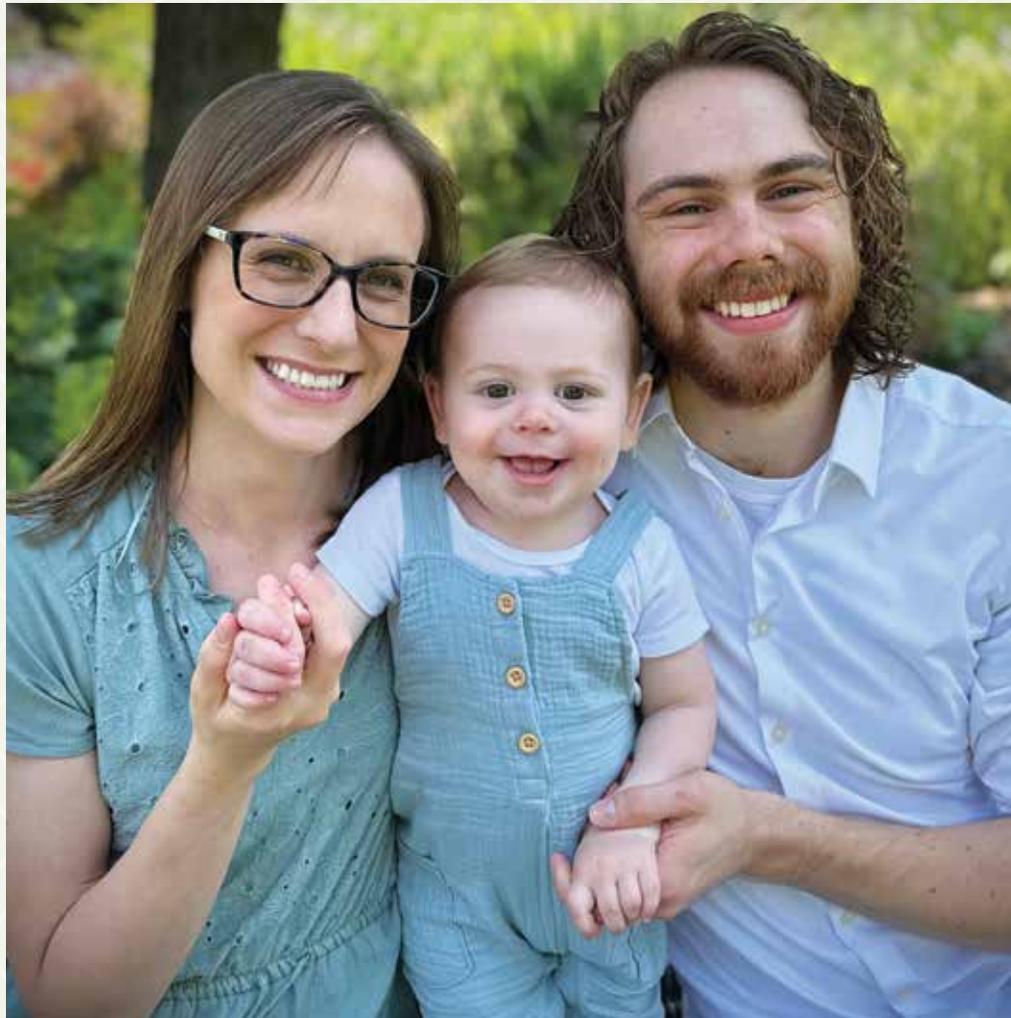
Everything changed shortly after I became a mom. New perspective helped me begin to make sense of my childhood experiences. I realized that my shame had denied me of the ability to understand my story. Fear left me afraid to face the guilt buried deep within. The guilt that I didn't save my sister from pain and suffering. The guilt of living without scars and having a "normal" life. Although I had never admitted it, part of me wished that it was me that was burned instead. My very reflection was an image of what was taken from her.

As I began to make sense of my childhood experiences, I explored and validated what happened to me rather than judge myself for what was seemingly wrong with me. I began to understand that the triggers that caused my emotions to go haywire were wounds associated with my trauma.

Feelings of shame, guilt, inadequacy, judgment, being misunderstood, out-of-control, or not belonging were all the keys to understanding my side of the story.

Years of building resiliency skills allowed me to begin to experience a complex phase of grief, where I began to process my experiences of trauma. I grieved the losses of my childhood. I allowed myself to feel a plethora of emotions associated with grief: anguish, hopelessness, sadness, despair, and anger. This time left me feeling a sense of lostness and longing. I allowed myself to feel sad and angry for the immense fear and perceived neglect that occurred the night of the fire. The night I saw my sister burned before my eyes and her charred body extinguished before me. I cared for the "inner child" inside me and the overly protective parts of myself. The little girl who helplessly witnessed her sister suffer over and over. The little girl who had no control over all the pain her sister had to endure.

Grief, in addition to various trauma therapies, brought forth a phase of immense healing. Gradually, I learned to let go of the shame and guilt. I grew to accept that I am not less of a sister, daughter, wife, mother, and friend if I choose to let



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go of the guilt. This is not my burden to carry. I learned that if I denied myself from feeling these emotions, I would deny myself the opportunity to live a life worth living. I began to move toward acceptance and make peace with what happened to me, my sister, and my family.

And I am beginning to believe that I am enough. Just as I am. ■

“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.” -Brené Brown

Note: The lessons shared in my story include the knowledge I've learned through various texts, including but not limited to: Atlas of the Heart, Daring Greatly, Rising Strong, Braving the Wildness, and The Gifts of

Imperfection by Brené Brown, The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk, Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving by Pete Walker, No Bad Parts by Richard Schwartz, Radical Compassion and Radical Acceptance by Tara Brach. My healing journey was made possible by the support of wonderful trauma-informed therapists and various trauma therapies. I share concepts derived from cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy.



About the Author

Katherine Hill, DNP, APRN, AGCNS-BC has her Doctorate of Nursing Practice from Winona State University. She works as a Clinical Nurse Specialist where she is passionate about providing holistic, whole-person care to patients while promoting changes within health care systems. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, Matt; son, Oliver (1); and two dogs, Bear (sheepadoodle) and Gibbs (springerdoodle). Her hobbies include nature hikes, game nights with friends, reading, swimming, playing piano, and crafting.

If you or a loved one are experiencing depression or PTSD symptoms or are struggling to adapt to life after a burn injury, know that you're not alone. There are resources to help:

CRISIS TEXT LINE |

Crisis Text Lines: Text **HOME to 741741** from anywhere in the United States to receive free 24/7 support from a crisis counselor (Also available on WhatsApp).



Northern Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) provides support and education for individuals and families affected by mental illnesses. Visit <https://nami.org> to learn more.



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) will get you connected with reliable, reputable sources for assistance with substance abuse. Visit <https://www.samhsa.gov> to learn more.



Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors offers a wide range of support services and resources, including peer support programming and virtual support groups. Email us at info@phoenix-society.org or call us at **800-888-2876** to learn more and get connected.