

Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

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Diane: Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the Catching Your Memories podcast. Everybody has an inspiring story, a memory, an experience to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in. In this episode, I have a conversation with Karyn Wing.

Much of Karyn's life has revolved around abuse. She was abused by her parents as a child and abused by partners who claimed to love her as an adult. You might think she would have no room in her heart for forgiveness. Now in her mid-fifties, Karyn understands why she got into abusive relationships. She learned how to step back and look at questionable situations with clear vision. She discovered that telling her story can provide healing for herself and for others. And she found out that forgiveness can help you move forward.

A warning: Some parts of Karyn's story may be triggering. Also, in some places, there were technical issues with Karyn's audio. My apologies for that. Now, let's meet Karyn Wing and hear her story.

Hello, Karyn, and welcome to *Catching Your Memories*.

Karyn: Hello. Thank you for having me.

Diane: Well, a big thank you to you for being here to share your story. This is a podcast about people's memories, and many of your memories are not happy ones.

Karyn: No, they're not.

Diane: And I'm sure that some of those memories are going to make people feel really sad. They're going to make people feel angry, but they should, they should. Before we get into your story and what transpired and how you have spent decades healing, how about you introduce us to who you are today?

Karyn: I am a strong advocate for the rights of people with mental illness. I am part of NAMI's Connection to Recovery. I'm a facilitator, co-facilitator, for two meetings every week. I was part of the team that wrote the RFP and founded the Waterville Peer Recovery Center. And I was its first advisory council president. Um, that place was my baby, and I miss it so much that it's not there. That saddens me.

Diane: It's not operating right now?

Karyn No. We're hoping that the state reopens the RFP process so that Motivational Services can bring that back.

Diane: Okay, well, a little later in our conversation, I'd like to talk more about some of those specific programs and agencies that helped you and your path to recovery. How old are you now?

Karyn: 55.

Diane: 55. And you are still on that path to recovery, is that right?

Karyn: That journey is not going to end. Mental illness as a whole is a lifelong journey. You can overcome the behaviors. You can change how you feel. You can do

things to relax yourself. You can change the way you look at a situation as it's happening, but it doesn't change the fact that you still have mental illness. I'm also a teacher of the NAMI Family to Family class because I have a son who has mental illness. So, I'm also part of that as part of NAMI. I learned when I took that class that what happened in childhood is considered a first hit. But for me, it was hits over and over and over again. But then the second hit, which is considered what triggers mental illness, happens as an adult or later childhood 17, 18, 19 into there. That's when what triggers mental illness. For most people that they found, that's when mental illness symptoms begin. You can show signs of it before then, but it's so hard to diagnose for a child, and even as an adult, it can be seven-plus years before you get a diagnosis.

Diane: Let's talk about your story. Why is it that you are sharing your story and you only started sharing it publicly about two years ago, is that right?

Karyn: Yes. Because it was time. It was time for me to share what happened to me so that others could recognize how important forgiveness is. How important moving on from trauma is. That it is possible, that it can be possible for them, that no matter what happened to you as a child, that it is possible to move on from there. You can reach out for support, that you can heal from trauma.

Diane: Have you found that sharing your story has also contributed to your healing?

Karyn: Oh, very much so. There are still so many unanswered questions whether my mother knew what was happening to me as a child. But I've learned that I can accept my mother as she is, that she will never be, can never be the parent I needed or wanted her to be. But I can accept her as she is and accept the relationship as is with her.

Diane: Let's talk about your childhood.

Karyn: Okay.

Diane: You grew up in an abusive home. Can you describe the abuse for us?

Karyn: My mother and father were physically abusive to me. My father was sexually abusive to me from ages either three to five until I was ten. I pinpointed that age. I've blocked out so much of my history, what memories I do have are I know it stopped about ten because that's when he started with my baby sister, my little sister.

Diane: My goodness. You had tried to tell your mother?

Karyn: In one of the memories, my mother was there at supper time. She got mad at me because I didn't eat whatever vegetable it was. And she put me to bed without any more supper. And it was later that night that my dad first penetrated me. I don't know where my mother was. When I talked to my aunt years later, my aunt said my mother had a really weird work schedule, so it's possible she was at work, it may be possible she was home. I don't know. That is unclear.

Diane: And you were so young.

Karyn: Right.

Diane: You just told us now that at some point when you were ten, he started abusing your sister instead of you.

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: And you had a reaction that some people might not understand unless they've been in your situation, your feelings toward your sister changed.

Karyn: It was the first time I remember hating her because I was no longer daddy's little girl. And as messed up as that seemed at the time, that's what I was feeling. Because to go back even further than that, the day my baby sister was born or just before then, my mother told my babysitter that she wished I would die because she only wanted one daughter. And that's how she treated me from the moment Paula was born. From the moment she was born.

Diane: Is that something you've been able to talk with her about as an adult?

Karyn: No. And so for me, I didn't have my mother's love. I didn't have her acceptance. I had Dad for those few years, as messed up as that was, right up until he started with Paula.

Diane: Was there anybody, when you were a child who was a safe person for you?

Karyn: My grandparents on both sides, one who lived only a few minutes away and one who lived way far away from us.

Diane: But they didn't know about the abuse?

Karyn: None of them. I didn't tell anyone.

Diane: And you also were abused outside the home?

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: So really, as a child, there was nobody that you could trust?

Karyn: No.

Diane: And so moving into teen age, even though your father wasn't sexually abusing you, I'm guessing that your parents still physically abused you and probably emotionally abused you?

Karyn: Oh, yes.

Diane: So, as I recall, you told me that when you were 16, you got pregnant.

Karyn: Yes. It wasn't sexual abuse. I chose this. He was a family friend. He was the same age as my parents. Technically, I was 15 when it started, 16 when I got pregnant. Because I was looking for that love. I was looking for love from anyone.

Diane: And it probably felt like the love I put that in quotes that your father showed you.

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: So, you went on to have two children, but that marriage didn't last, right?

Karyn: Right.

Diane: You went on to have how many other marriages after that?

Karyn: Technically five. There's a weird story in the middle of that. I thought I was married to one. We weren't married. He had fake divorce papers. Weird story altogether.

Diane: Yeah. Quite a lot of drama.

Karyn: Yeah.

Diane: But during this time, when you went sort of from marriage to marriage, some of those marriages were abusive. One marriage, in particular, you've told me was very abusive. And by then, you had several children.

Karyn: He was the father of the other three children.

Diane: So you've had five children altogether?

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: So, this particular husband was extraordinarily abusive?

Karyn: In every respect. And I lost all my children.

Diane: Because why?

Karyn: First of all, the state came in and took the oldest three because he had spanked my son's butt and left a bruise. When the State showed up at the door, Kevin said either I take the blame or he would kill me. And I knew he meant it.

Diane: And did you stay with him?

Karyn: Unfortunately, I did for six and a half years.

Diane: Explain to me, because there are a lot of people who will ask, why didn't you just leave him? He's a, um, horrible human being.

Karyn: Because I didn't know anything different in my life until I found The Abused Women's Advocacy Project.

Diane: Abused Women's Advocacy Project? Is that what you said?

Karyn: They're the group out of Rumford and my best friend of 30 some odd years right now.

Diane: So this organization helped you to get out of abusive relationships?

Karyn: They taught me what abuse was. They taught me that it wasn't love. I started attending their group, and I was still so messed up because Kevin was still doing the I love you, I'm sorry that I married him. Twenty days later, 20 days later, I was in an abused women's shelter in Lewiston.

Diane: So let me understand. This is the man who is the father of your younger children.

Karyn: The youngest three.

Diane: You weren't married at that point, but you ended up getting married to him? And then you went to the shelter?

Karyn: But the shelter was at that point, I really want to say inadequate. My baby ended up with pneumonia, and I ended up at Central Maine Medical Center, and I had all five children with me. My baby's got pneumonia, and I don't know where I'm going to go because he's sick. They won't take care of my kids while I'm at the hospital. I don't have anyone. And so I went back to him.

Diane: During these years of being in abusive relationships, going through all of this, you must have been under so much pressure. I can't imagine that you didn't have depression, anxiety, all kinds of things happening for you. How did you cope? You found the Abused Women's Advocacy Program, but you still, you had to cope on a day-to-day basis with all of this.

Karyn: It was a daily struggle, and I wasn't on any meds at that point, none for my mental illness. They had diagnosed me with PTSD, depression, and bipolar at that point. Bipolar was later dropped to anxiety, depression, PTSD, because later nobody could see the bipolar in me.

Diane: What kind of care were you getting at that point?

Karyn: Counseling, and that's it.

Diane: Were you ever suicidal?

Karyn: Yeah, thoughts of ending it daily, and even more so when you're getting beat up. It becomes so real that you just don't care.

Diane: So, how many years would you say these things went on for you before you found real help?

Karyn: 10, 15.

Diane: And what changed things for you?

Karyn: DBT program.

Diane: What's that?

Karyn: Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.

Diane: I've not heard of that before.

Karyn: It's a weekly class that teaches you to not think with your emotional mind, to not think with your rational mind, to stand right in the middle of them and take that step back and look at the situation from neither side and to not react either way until you take that step back and can see it clearly.

Diane: How did you find out about it?

Karyn: My case manager at that point, and I had taken the class I want to say I started it like, three times, and each program closed down before I finally got through the entire book. And it was almost towards the end of the book when I was the only person in class that day. My teacher and I went over the material. The very next week, the other people were back, and my teacher said, you're teaching this week. I'm like, really? He's like, yeah, we're going to go do the same thing we did last week. So I taught, and I was still so excited about it when I met with my case manager after. And she said, have you ever heard of NAMI? And I said no, what's

that? And she said, well, they have a program where you teach support groups just like what you basically just did upstairs. And I'm like, wow, and she said, I'll bring you some information about that. I didn't wait that long. I went home, got on my computer, looked up NAMI. I was already part of the Consumer Council at that point. Found out that a woman I knew was part of NAMI, called her, the number on there, talked to her. She picked me up for my first Connection to Recovery support group. Two weeks later, it was mentioned that they were looking for people to take the next class to become facilitators. I signed up one week later. I was in the class to become a facilitator. And that's how we shall say the rest is history.

Diane: So it seems to me that a major part of your healing is being able to really connect with other people and to facilitate groups and to help other people.

Karyn: Yeah.

Diane: That's amazing. Why don't you tell me about the group that you started in Waterville?

Karyn: Waterville Peer Recovery Center is or was, I should say there are other peer centers in the state of Maine. But Waterville Peer Recovery Center was a center that focused on recovery. That gave all-day long groups centered around recovery. Whether it be mental illness like Pathways to Recovery. Monday. Wednesday and Friday we did a roundtable recovery talk where we were doing different workbooks that we'd run through. Every morning would be affirmations and gratitude. Every week we did a karaoke. So we did have music appreciation type stuff too, which for me, music has always been a calming effect on my mental health issues. When I'm really stressed, I turn to music. So that was a big one for me. To share that with everyone at first was really scary, you know, to get up to the microphone and even if somebody else was singing it. But I did it. And it felt good

and I felt inspired. These are people that after you get to know them at the center, you're comfortable there. These are people you get to know and trust, and that's a giant part of it. But there are so many groups that they do there that you can attend, and just the ones where you just go and sit out in the main room and talk with not only the staff but with other people.

Diane: How did you become connected with the Waterfield Peer Recovery Center in the first place?

Karyn: Elaine Eckert. She worked for NAMI, but she was also one of the co-facilitators for Connections Recovery. When the opportunity came for the RFP process because the state didn't like how the social clubs were running, they weren't focused on recovery, and the state was moving towards the recovery movement. And so NAMI decided they were going to put in a bid for the Waterville Peer Recovery Center because, as it just turned out, NAMI owned the building. So, Elaine asked me, Donald Banton, and Murray Campbell, who is part of the Family to Family group, to be part of the team for the RFP process, as well as a couple of other wonderful ladies.

And we wrote the RFP. When we first started, we were like, so what's different? What can we do different that they're not doing at the Social Club now? And none of us could really answer that, because none of us had actually stepped into the Social Club. So I did. I went over, and the big one I could see was you walk through the door to the Social Club and nobody said hi. You didn't know who was staff, you didn't know who was there for anything, and nothing was happening there. There were no groups, you know, you ate, you did a chore, and that was about it. The rest of the time, you were either playing cards or they were getting into fights. That's all I could see that was happening.

Diane: So they came up, you came up with a plan?

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: And the focus was on recovery?

Karyn: That's what the state wanted us to focus on anyways.

Diane: How long did it stay open?

Karyn: Seven years.

Diane: And it's only recently that it has closed?

Karyn: Yeah.

Diane: So it's pretty sad for you and the group that ran the place, but I think you probably all will continue to be advocates and find other avenues?

Karyn: We kept Waterville Connection Recovery open. We're online doing that still every Wednesday.

Diane: And that's a support group?

Karyn: It is. It was part of Waterville before the Peer Center, and it remained afterwards, even though we're online.

Diane: Okay. So, it seems to me then, that becoming involved in the Peer Recovery Center, being part of NAMI, they play a huge role, and you're being much healthier than you used to be?

Karyn: So much so that three and a half years ago now. I want to say maybe closer to four. I'm no longer taking meds for mental illness.

Diane: Meds for depression and anxiety?

Karyn: Right. I'm on none of them.

Diane: And you're feeling okay?

Karyn: Yeah.

Diane: You must have learned coping mechanisms, though, because you must have up and downs?

Karyn: Yes. But on those bad days, I know what to do.

Diane: Give me some examples. What do you know what to do?

Karyn: Art for me, is giant. I'm an avid gamer.

Diane: So, you have coping mechanisms. You have things that you can turn to when you start to feel some of the feelings that you'd rather not be feeling, to put it bluntly. Was there a moment in your life that got you on this road to recovery? Did something change in your life that made you realize it was possible?

Karyn: When my dad, or just before my dad died, I was introduced to Tyler Perry and his movies. Medea taught me a very valuable lesson in one of the movies, which is, forgiveness is not for the other person. Forgiveness is for you. And so when my dad got really sick and I knew that it wasn't, he was in ICU on a BiPAP machine, that it wasn't going to be forever. And I had 30 seconds, maybe less. I looked at him and I said, Dad, I love you and I forgive you for everything you ever did to me. Three days later, my dad is in and out of consciousness, and a nurse comes in and swabs, takes the BiPAP off long enough to swab, and Dad's trying to talk to me, and he's like, I just want to say I'm sorry for everything that I ever did to you that was part of that. The rest of it was, I think I'm going to die, and I told him that was between him and God. And then he went back off to sleep. Me and my sister and my mom were doing 15 minutes increments in the room because they

had it so cold because he was on morphine. And so the room was like 52 degrees. It was really cold in there.

So, we were like bundled all up in jackets and blankets and whatnot, doing 15 minutes in the room at a time. And so I just long enough to stop crying before my sister came in and said, mum would like to go to lunch now. And so I ate like, three bites of lunch and that was all I could choke down because that was very profound at that moment. That started my journey, that day of recovery, that it is possible between saying that I forgave him and then my dad saying that he was sorry, that started that journey of recovery for me.

Diane: How long ago was that?

Karyn: Dad died, I think it was eleven years ago.

Diane: And for you, you knew that it was sincere. This was a dying man's words. That's really profound. That is amazing because so many people can't get to that point, can they?

Karyn: So many people can't.

Diane: And it doesn't mean that you let go of some of those memories or you're not triggered by certain things, but it just opens the door for you to be able to recover.

Karyn. Right.

Diane: So, let's fast forward to right this moment. You're in a good spot. You know how to take care of yourself after years of not loving yourself, I'll bet you. You love yourself?

Karyn: Most days.

Diane: That's normal. What do you hope that people will take away from hearing your story?

Karyn: Number one, that if you see someone is struggling, that you reach out to them, that you as a friend, you as a coworker, you as even their boss, can have a profound effect. If you're professional, like their doctor or something, you don't have that effect that a friend would have of saying, I see you're struggling, is there something I can do?

That changes things for them and can start them on their journey. Number two, that if you are that person that's struggling, that forgiveness is possible. That a journey towards recovery is possible. That loving yourself and loving life again is possible. That yes, there are bad days, but there's so much that you can do to change it.

Diane: Do you have a relationship with your children today?

Karyn: Yes. Four out of the five of them.

Diane: And with your mother, is she still alive?

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: And have you had to kind of find your way with her, decide what the relationship is going to be, or were you able to forgive her as well?

Karyn: I'm at a place where I know that my mother will never be anything but what she is, and I can love her where she's at. And my mom has cancer, and I know it's just a matter of time right now.

Diane: What happened between you and your dad when he was dying was really profound, and it changed your life. You're pretty sure you can't have that kind of a moment with your mother.

Karyn: If it happens, it happens, but I'm not going to expect it.

Diane: Or force it?

Karyn: Or force it.

Diane: So, for now, you are pretty healthy. You know what to do. You have your days, but you have your support systems. You have people who love you, people you love. So, life is good for you?

Karyn: Yes.

Diane: Are there any questions you wish I had asked that I didn't?

Karyn: No, I can't think of anything.

Diane: Do you want to end on any more words of wisdom?

Karyn: Can't think of anything. But thank you so much, Diane, for letting me talk.

Diane: Well, thank you for being willing to talk. You had a lot to share.

That brings us to the end of this episode of the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. Many thanks to Karyn Wing for sharing her story with us. If you would like to learn more about NAMI Maine and the services they offer, visit their website namimaine.org, that's n-a-m-i-Maine.

If you would like to read a transcript of this episode, see a list of mental health and abuse resources, or leave a comment, go to CatchingYourMemories.com/podcast. Be sure to come back in two weeks for another episode of *Catching Your Memories*.

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