

# Therapy Chat Episode 328



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[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** Therapy chat podcast, episode 328.

[00:00:04] **Announcer:** This is the Therapy Chat podcast with Laura Reagan LCSW-C. The information shared in this podcast is not a substitute for seeking help from a licensed mental health professional. And now here's your host, Laura Reagan LCSW-C.

[00:00:37] **Laura Reagan:** Today's episode is sponsored by Trauma Therapists Network. Trauma Therapist Network is a platform for finding a trauma

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[00:01:18] **Laura Reagan:** And now for all you prescribers out there, Therapy Notes is proudly introducing e-prescribe. Use coupon code chat, or click the link in the show notes to get two free months at [therapynotes.com](http://therapynotes.com).

[00:01:31] **Laura Reagan:** Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan. And today I'm bringing you a conversation about a very complicated topic that is relevant to many of us, and it's a sensitive subject.

[00:01:46] **Laura Reagan:** So today we're talking about estrangement and reconciliation with a parent who was not there for you, the way that you needed them to be in childhood. I think you'll, if you're a therapist or anyone who has experienced sexual abuse in their life, you may be familiar with the name, Laura Davis. Laura Davis is a co-author of the bestselling book, *The Courage To Heal*.

[00:02:16] **Laura Reagan:** That was the first book that I read to learn about sexual abuse and what the healing process looks like following sexual abuse. And it was the first book that talked about healing from sexual abuse. It came out 34 years ago. Sold over a million copies. And it's very powerful. Laura wrote that book with her co-author Ellen Bass and she writes from her experience as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

[00:02:47] **Laura Reagan:** And when she told her mother that she had been sexually abused by her grandfather, who was her mother's father, her mother's response was not supportive and very invalid. And that began an estrangement between them that lasted for a very long time. So she talks about this in our conversation, but this discussion is about after having a strained relationship with a parent or family member because of trauma and abuse or neglect.

[00:03:19] **Laura Reagan:** Even if the family member was not the one who abused you directly, it can really interfere with relationships. And she talks about what it was like for her when, after having such a strained relationship for

so long, her mother toward the end of her life, wanted to move to the town where Laura lives and asked Laura to take care of.

[00:03:46] **Laura Reagan:** So her book is a real page turner. I mean, you can't put it down. It's really, it really draws you in and keeps you interested, wondering what's going to happen next, but I hope you will listen to this discussion and think about those relationships that you may have in your life now that are strained. And being curious about this process that she went through.

[00:04:11] **Laura Reagan:** It's a pertinent topic. When you know, many of my clients have not so positive relationships with parents who. Didn't meet their emotional needs or abuse them in some way when they were children. And you know, it does do harm over a lifetime. So it really does impact those relationships. But this is a beautiful story of how for Laura and her mom, they had a transformative thing happened in their relationship.

[00:04:40] **Laura Reagan:** And, you know, with the other conversations that I've had here on the podcast, other therapists and authors about family estrangement and healing from abuse and trauma. I felt that talking with Laura about her experience with this was a really important piece to include. So I hope you will enjoy what I thought was a very thought provoking conversation.

[00:05:07] **Laura Reagan:** Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan. And today I am so honored to be speaking with Laura Davis, who many of you will know as author of the classic book, *The Courage To Heal*. And six other or five other books, including her newest book, *The Burning Light Of Two Stars*, a mother daughter story.

[00:05:31] **Laura Reagan:** Laura, thank you so much for being my guest on Therapy Chat today.

[00:05:34] **Laura Davis:** Oh, I've really been looking forward to this conversation.

[00:05:37] **Laura Reagan:** Me too. I am really excited to get into talking with you and your book is fascinating and an engrossing. But before we get into talking about it, can you just start off by telling our audience more about who you are and what you've been doing?

[00:05:55] **Laura Davis:** Sure. You know, I'm a person of words. And since I was really a little girl, I've used words as a way to express myself, as a way to

vent, as a way to understand what I was thinking and feeling, as a way to sort out choices, um, as a way to process feelings. It's just, I've gone to the page and to the pen. And then as I got a little older, even starting as a teenager, I began to put that writing out into the world.

[00:06:22] **Laura Davis:** And in the many decades, since then, I have used writing to educate, to inspire, to inform, to provoke, to challenge just, you know, in every kind of way you could use words to influence. I have done that. On my website, there's a little tagline that says healing words that change lives. And I think that's really a good fit for who I am and how I extend myself out into the world, both in terms of the seven books that I've written, but also for the last 25 years, I've been a writing teacher and I have guided others in how to use writing as a tool for healing, for self knowledge, for clarification. And I love creating the kind of synergy that happens when you get a room full of people writing and reading their words together. There's, there's just nothing like it. So that's what I love. My first book, *Courage To Heal*. I wrote with Ellen Bass, it was published when I was just 31 years old.

[00:07:24] **Laura Davis:** It was about how to heal from child sexual abuse. And it was, it was the first book that really talked about the healing process and it was kind of like igniting a flame. It really launched the incest survivor recovery movement of the late eighties and early nineties. And I was suddenly catapulted into this kind of weird kind of fame for the worst thing that had ever happened to me because I was an incest survivor and my grandfather had been my perpetrator.

[00:07:52] **Laura Davis:** And although that's not what that book was about. I did out him in it. Um, mostly it was a how to book for other people. And suddenly I was in this position of traveling around the country, giving speeches and talking to auditoriums full of women who would come on buses from all over, because we were presenting hope that if this happened to you, that there was a path out and we laid out that path and, you know, that led to other things.

[00:08:18] **Laura Davis:** I wrote four books on healing from sexual abuse. And then I, I just got to a point where I didn't want that to be. What my profession and my life was about, was about my trauma from the past. And so I, I walked away from that career, that path kind of at the peak of my success. And I had a family and I started writing other things.

[00:08:37] **Laura Davis:** I wrote a parenting book and wrote a book called *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again* about reconciliation, um, which was inspired by my path toward reconciliation with my mother, who I had been bitterly

estranged from, um, over many things, but absolutely over the incest, which had happened with her father. And so, you know, and then I began teaching and I've just been doing those same things for all these years.

[00:09:00] **Laura Davis:** Just really loving the power of words and story to transform our lives.

[00:09:05] **Laura Reagan:** Yes. It can be so healing to process and reflect through the written word and to express what is deep inside through writing is beautiful. So, I mean, you've obviously changed many lives with your book. And well, all of your books. And I know that for me, that was the first book I read about learning about sexual abuse.

[00:09:32] **Laura Reagan:** When I was starting out in my work as a, an advocate in a sexual assault crisis center back in 2002. So that's 20 years ago, but the book was already about almost 20 years old, maybe then.

[00:09:45] **Laura Davis:** Yeah, it's been 34 years actually in March. It was 34 years since it first came out. And it's, you know, it's ironic because I remember Ellen and I, my co-author, we would have these conversations.

[00:09:57] **Laura Davis:** We were so naive. We thought, well, once we tell people about the problem and how to solve it and how to heal, it will just stop. I mean, I think we really believed that. And now. We have like the third generation of people using *The Courage To Heal*, you know, we've updated the book many times to reflect, you know, what's been learned about trauma and the brain and many other things.

[00:10:20] **Laura Davis:** And although I'm glad that it's still a mainstay for many therapists and for survivors of all kinds of abuse, I'm also really sad that it's still needed, you know, that, that sexual trauma. Uh, for children and, and women and men and trans people and all kinds of people, it's still just a mainstay of our society.

[00:10:40] **Laura Reagan:** Yes, I'm really sad about that too.

[00:10:42] **Laura Reagan:** And I know what you mean, thinking we just need to let everybody know and then no one will allow this to continue. And I wish that were true. But what you have done is very hopeful because I think one of the things that is so common for people is feeling like they're the only one that this has happened to and learning that it's sadly not that unusual and that healing is possible.

[00:11:08] **Laura Reagan:** Can be very hopeful.

[00:11:09] **Laura Davis:** You know, the other thing that I, I am talking about a lot now because I, I did the bulk of my kind of very intense healing from sexual abuse, you know, 30 years ago. And over 30 years ago, like 35 years ago. And I'm really interested in looking at what does healing look like over a whole lifetime?

[00:11:29] **Laura Davis:** You know, not just when you're in the heat of processing the trauma and it's, it's all consuming as a process and you think you'll never get past it, but what is it like 30 years after that? You know, what does life look like? How do, what, what things happened that you never thought might have happened?

[00:11:46] **Laura Davis:** And in my case, one of those things was that I actually made peace with my mother, the mother who had betrayed me by not believing what had happened to me, you know, we became deeply estranged and. Over the course of, you know, the next 20 years, we gradually began working our way back into each other's lives.

[00:12:05] **Laura Davis:** And you know, how we did that and why I chose to do that. And the result is a lot of what I wrote about in the memoir. And then at the end of my mother's life, I ended up becoming her caregiver. And so, you know, *The Burning Light Of Two Stars* really answers the question. Can you caretake a parent who betrayed you in the past?

[00:12:25] **Laura Davis:** You know, and, and what is the process of reconciliation? Is it, when is it appropriate? When is it best to just hold boundaries and never breach them? And so that's something I'm very, very interested in and there's not one size fits all everyone's situation is different, but for me, there was enough redeemable in that relationship for me to really fight for it and for my mother to fight for it too.

[00:12:50] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah, I agree. It's a fascinating subject. And that's what made me really excited about talking with you because I think when I started out, it was often emphasized, at least in more of the advocacy circles. If someone behaves in an abusive manner towards you, you should distance yourself from them. I mean, for safety, but also you don't have to continue a relationship with anyone who has harmed you, whether it's a family member or not.

[00:13:24] **Laura Reagan:** And. You know, that, that idea that we all have the right to set the boundaries that are right for us. Certainly that's true. And I think it's, it becomes more complicated than that. When you look at a lifetime, like you said, you know, I think there may be limitations to how simply cutting off contact with someone or limiting contact, you know, based on how one decides to do so, that may be effective for relieving the stress of the interactions for the person who was victimized. And there may be parts of them that really miss having relationship with family too. So, you know, it's not so simple as just cutting ties and that's the end of it. There's so much more complexity and I feel like you are addressing this really well in your book.

[00:14:15] **Laura Davis:** Yeah. There's, there's, you know, I wrote another book about reconciliation. I Thought We'd. Never Speak Again. And in that book, I talked about really a continuum of reconciliation and I talked about four different types of reconciliation. And I think many of us from watching a lot of like TV movies and, um, you know, kind of what's in the media.

[00:14:36] **Laura Davis:** Is this kind of deathbed reconciliation scene, you know, where there's this mutual healing, it leads to transformation and this real intimacy in the relationship either renewed or established for the first time. And you know, all the past hurts are resolved and. Both people experience closeness and renewed growth and ease.

[00:14:57] **Laura Davis:** And although that does happen occasionally, and it's what we really covet. It's the rarest form of reconciliation. It's unusual. And it's an incredible gift when that kind of transformation can happen in a relationship. The second type is where, and this, this is something I did with my mother initially, as.

[00:15:16] **Laura Davis:** When one person changes their frame of reference and their expectations so that their perception of the relationship and its possibility opens up whether or not the other person changes. And the third is that they're still ambivalent or unresolved feelings, but both parties agree to disagree and establish some kind of ground rules.

[00:15:38] **Laura Davis:** That enable a limited, but cordial relationship. This would enable you to do something like attend the same wedding together, you know, without just completely choking on your food. And in this third scenario, you know, the best you could hope for is peaceful coexistence, but not any real close. And, and my mother and I did that, the agreeing to disagree, and we did it over the issue of the incest.

[00:16:00] **Laura Davis:** You know, I, for many years I was adamant that she had to believe me. That was my line in the sand. And she was adamant that I needed to recant. And for me after. Many I, this is the important part. After many years of healing and many years of separation where I really established my own autonomy. I got to a point where I knew so deeply my own experience.

[00:16:24] **Laura Davis:** I did not need any validation from her. And I began to understand kind of the trauma of her life, the epigenetics of trauma that moved through our family. And I began to realize she was not capable of believing me and I, there was no way I was ever going to recant. And so we agreed to disagree. We basically set that aside, knowing that there was no resolution and we began to focus on just small things.

[00:16:51] **Laura Davis:** Like, you know, like we both like to play cards together. We like to go to the movies together. She wanted to have a relationship with her grandchildren, which I think was a huge motivator. And I wanted her to be the grandmother. And, you know, there would be many people you would not want to be a grandparent to your children.

[00:17:08] **Laura Davis:** It would be inappropriate because they're were abusers, but that was not the case with her. I'd I'd witnessed her with my niece and I saw that she was actually a much better grandmother than she was a mother. And so I think that motivated us to try to find a way to connect. So we started building these new tendrils of connection and really let the past be in the past.

[00:17:28] **Laura Davis:** And I think this is quite a useful approach, especially right now, when there is so much divisiveness in families, you know, over politics over vaccinations, over masking. There there's all these rifts that are taking place that are tearing families apart. And there still may be solid things in those relationships, but these issues are just getting in the way.

[00:17:50] **Laura Davis:** And if you can agree to disagree and focus on what is actually working, what is actually connecting, it's possible to continue to have a relationship, the fourth kind of reconciliation. Is really when it's impossible to have a direct relationship with the other person, like maybe the person they're too abusive, they're too toxic.

[00:18:10] **Laura Davis:** And in that case, the wisest healthiest choice, despite the pressure you might feel from the outside and also from the inside is to cut that relationship off. And no one should ever sacrifice their own well-being to maintain a psychologically devastating relationship, you know? And in that



instance, there's you set a boundary and you have to do the work inside yourself, you know, and, and for me it was, it was the kinds of things I talked about looking beyond just this relationship with my mother and seeing the generational picture, looking at the trauma, passed down through the family, sending loving kindness to that person from afar.

[00:18:49] **Laura Davis:** I remember this one woman I interviewed, she said, you know, Laura I've closed the door, but I left the porch light on. And I just thought that was such a beautiful. Beautiful image. So those are the, those are the four types of reconciliation. And I remember this, this other person I interviewed, she said, you know, so many times it's the phenomenal recoveries and the great emotional stories.

[00:19:11] **Laura Davis:** These magnificent changes are the stories that are told, but, but really we can only make a few such breakthroughs in our lives. And that the failure to be miraculous is not a failure that even a few tiny steps forward actually really represents progress. And I think ultimately the opposite of reconciliation, the opposite of estrangement, I used to think it was was reconciliation, but actually it's peace. How can you get to a place of peace with what is, this is the way things are right now, you know, I'm not speaking to so-and-so, you know, or we, the only, the best level for this relationship is in letters, you know, or we, we play words with friends together, but we never have a real conversation.

[00:19:53] **Laura Davis:** It's like, what is the point at which any relationship is possible? Or maybe it isn't.

[00:19:58] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. And those are really hard questions. I think that one of the things that can make it even more tricky is, and I see this a lot where people, I guess maybe you can speak to this, but people say, oh yeah, that happened. You know, but I've let that go.

[00:20:15] **Laura Reagan:** It's in the past, I've forgiven them, but without really much process to make that happen, it seems like it's more like a smoothing things over somehow for the sake of. Keeping the peace, which is in a way denying that person who was victimized there actually, you know, the truth of their actual experience.

[00:20:35] **Laura Reagan:** You know, I feel like sometimes people just say they've forgiven and they think they forgiven, but internally, it's all turmoil.

[00:20:44] **Laura Davis:** Yeah, I'm really glad you brought that up because there's, there's a real difference between actual reconciliation and capitulation. And, you know, capitulation to me is like bowing down and backing down because the consequences of holding onto the truth is too painful and that you, so you, you sublimate yourself and you ignore your personal needs.

[00:21:05] **Laura Davis:** You sacrifice yourself, and that's very different than holding steady to the truth. And making the choice to relate anyway. And I think, you know, you could often tell in your body, in the moment, which of those places you're coming from, but yeah, there's a lot of false forgiveness. There's a lot of smoothing over and that's why, you know, I think it's really important to say that reconcile, if there is going to be any kind of reconciliation, it is not at the beginning of the healing process.

[00:21:34] **Laura Davis:** You know, it is way, way, way, way. Down the line. You have to do your own deep healing work first, before you could even consider the possibility of reconciliation, you know, grief and anger are just as essential to the reconciliation process as compassion and love. And yet there's a lot of pressure to do so, you know, people are told forgive, let bygones be bygones.

[00:21:58] **Laura Davis:** It happened a long time ago. Let go of the past and. We have to first make that separation and set those boundaries. And I think for many people, a healing separation is necessary and it could be weeks, months, it could be decades. And I think there has to be a period where. You learn who you are separate from that family system and establish your own separate autonomy.

[00:22:26] **Laura Davis:** And, and it's only really when you, you, you have to have a separate self to reconcile with and you, you can't reconcile with someone you're a meshed with. Um, and there's also, I think there's a process of rebalancing the scales reclaiming your own power and agency before this kind of work could even be considered.

[00:22:44] **Laura Davis:** You have to, um, I guess the way I like to think of it, as you have to rebuild yourself into a person who was not capable of being hurt in the same way, you know, uh, you know, basically. I am not available to be devastated by you anymore. And that takes a lot of years of work to get there. And I think that's the point at which these issues can be considered an assessed.

[00:23:06] **Laura Reagan:** That's a great description because you know, that smoothing over type of, you know, false forgiveness sounds like. It's really,

there's an implicit agreement. I forgive you. And we have a relationship. As long as I deny that what happened was painful to me or something like that.

[00:23:27] **Laura Davis:** It's a very, for me, you know, with my mother, which is what I wrote the memoir was about, you know, tracks my relationship with her from my birth until her death.

[00:23:37] **Laura Davis:** So a 57 year period, and it was complicated, you know, there was nothing simple or easy, or, you know, there's no like violins playing about the happy ending. It's a very complicated situation. And, you know, part of, for me, you know, my mother did not abuse me, but she gaslit me, she did a lot of other things.

[00:23:58] **Laura Davis:** She denied my reality. She was very challenging in many ways. And she had good qualities and I had to rectify those two realities. You know, it's like, I remember one time I was working with this coach to finish my book. I was stuck in the last year I was writing it and, uh, Joshua, his name was, and he gave me this assignment and.

[00:24:20] **Laura Davis:** He wanted me to make a list of what he called secret bonds with my mother, like places that two of us were connected that no one else was connected. And I, I looked at him like he was nuts, but I went home and I ended up with this like five page list of all these things that connected us. And it was kind of shocking.

[00:24:37] **Laura Davis:** And some of them were quite negative, you know, and, and painful. And a lot of them were very positive and that was such a wake-up for me, because part of what I did, my part. In the estrangement from my mother was that I saw her when I was younger. You know, she was like, uh, I used to describe her as like a spider, trying to lure me into her web to devour me.

[00:24:59] **Laura Davis:** That's how I felt about her. And I, I always looked for evidence that would support that. And the more positive qualities, the more positive interactions, I just didn't take note of them. And so I was always creating a vendetta against her in my head. And she had, there were a lot of things she did that were terrible, but she wasn't exclusively that way.

[00:25:20] **Laura Davis:** And so, you know, by the time she moved out to my town from across the country, To live out the end of her life. I had a lot of ambivalence about her doing that. Part of me was dreading it and feeling like it

was going to ruin my life. Um, and that, that the only reason we had achieved any reconciliation was that there were 3000 miles distance between us.

[00:25:42] **Laura Davis:** But there was another part of me that really kind of hungered and longed for the possibility that maybe we could actually reconcile this relationship, the rest of the way that we could get beyond kind of the formal rules that enabled us to relate to each other. And I wanted to read something from the book that just a little section.

[00:26:01] **Laura Davis:** 'cause it really shows kind of the complexity of how we feel about these family members. I mean, I'm not talking about someone who was like out and out an evil perpetrator, you know, where there just is nothing redeeming, but in many of our relationships, they're mixed, they're complicated. And this represents that.

[00:26:19] **Laura Davis:** So. Just to set the scene for this. My mother's 81 years old, she's living in a mobile home park across the town of my town. She's just moved to California and I go to visit her after being out of town for work for a week. And I'm, she's complaining she's in the early stages of dementia. She's got a lot going on and I try to comfort her.

[00:26:40] **Laura Davis:** And by hugging her, but I'm completely stiff. I can't really handle touching her or being touched by her and she confronts me about it. And this is what I wrote afterwards. And this is the kind of self analysis I had to do to get clean in that relationship.

[00:26:56] **Laura Davis:** Three decades earlier, I had erected an impenetrable wall between us, a fortress with narrow slits so I could watch her approach. I ensured that my defenses were prepared any time she came near me. I always had an escape plan. It's true. We later reconciled and the fact that we were able to create a functional relationship was a miracle, but it wasn't an intimate miracle because I never took down my wall.

[00:27:23] **Laura Davis:** Oh. I taught myself to be kind to her in a fake it till you make it sort of way. But I still held her at bay. My wall just got subtler. It wasn't permeable. It was hard and opaque. And there was no door. We only met in the ante chamber. The common room where guests are received. Only my polished self was on display.

[00:27:44] **Laura Davis:** My masked self and only in the Anta chamber, mom never saw my inner sanctum and I never saw hers. I got as close as I could within the constraints I had established, but closed is closed and a closed heart

is a lonely one. The price I paid to keep my mother out at first with withdrawal later, with an armed fortress, and finally, with a polite rules of detente was love. The pure unfettered love I longed for. The pure unfettered love she craved. That day in the kitchen when I couldn't comfort her, I had to face it. My mother was still a stranger to me with tentacles of need I was loathe to touch. I wanted to be more than kind to do more than merely what was right. I wanted to love my mother just once freely and with the relief of a lost, exhausted child.

[00:28:34] **Laura Davis:** Beyond words and beyond all pretense, I wanted to lay my head on a place that was safe just once before it was too late.

[00:28:44] **Laura Reagan:** Running a group private practice has been a challenging and rewarding experience. And one thing that has made it so much easier is Therapy Notes. Therapy Notes makes billing, scheduling, note taking and tele-health incredibly easy.

[00:28:57] **Laura Reagan:** If you're coming from another EHR, like I did Therapy Notes makes the transition incredibly easy. Importing your demographic data free of charge so you can get going right away. My team has found Therapy Notes very easy to learn. It's intuitive. The customer support is second to none.

[00:29:14] **Laura Reagan:** And that's one of the things that has kept me a Therapy Notes customer for several years now, anytime I've needed to contact therapy notes for help with an issue, I couldn't figure out on my own. I've been able to get through to someone and resolve the issue within 15 minutes, 99% of the. Find out what more than a hundred thousand mental health professionals already know try Therapy Notes for two months absolutely free. Just click on the link in the show notes or enter the promo code chat at [therapynotes.com](https://therapynotes.com).

[00:29:46] **Laura Reagan:** I think those words really capture what, you know, the child parts of us that need a relationship with our mother. And when you know, something happens like abuse and you tell your mother and your mother's, your attachment figure and whatever, whoever your primary caregiver is, you tell them, and they don't believe you.

[00:30:07] **Laura Reagan:** It is such a betrayal that the child loses so much there that they need in relationships. So. I feel like that really captures it. You know, that that part is still there. Even when you're in your fifties and your mother is in her eighties, you know.

[00:30:24] **Laura Davis:** Yep. It doesn't end. I, you know, I think these relationships, a lot of them continue after death.

[00:30:28] **Laura Davis:** You know, I think sometimes we, can't sort out a relationship with a really difficult person until they're not here anymore, you know, because you don't have to deal with the daily reality of the relationship. You know, there's a, there's an epigraph I put in the front of the memoir by the author Debra for Shea.

[00:30:45] **Laura Davis:** And she said, every time I look in their rear view mirror, the past has changed. And you know, for me that really captures the arc of this relationship that I wrote about that. You know, if you had said to me, when I was 27 and my mother had just, you know, we became bitterly estranged over. My disclosure of the abuse.

[00:31:06] **Laura Davis:** If you had told me I'd be taking care of her at the end of her life, I would have looked at you like you were absolutely insane. You know, I, even one time my brother and I, when I was in my thirties, my brother and I went for a hike and my parents were divorced. And I remember I said to him, look, when they get old, I'll take dad.

[00:31:22] **Laura Davis:** You take mom. There's no way I could ever take care of her. You know? And so I never could have anticipated. I'd not end up in the situation. Choose the situation that I chose and I'm, I'm very grateful. I did. I, my, I learned to move from my head into my heart in such a powerful way. Through those years of caregiving, that for me, it was the right solution.

[00:31:43] **Laura Davis:** And yet it absolutely might be the wrong solution for someone else. I think it's important to say. That when someone abuses another person in a family, it breaks the normal expectations like that. Maybe children should take care of their parents. You know, they lose that right. Once they abuse you. And so whatever you decide to do, it has to be a decision about, for me, it was a lot, what kind of person do I want to be?

[00:32:08] **Laura Davis:** You know, and I, and I also felt there was something redeemable, but for someone else that might be absolutely the wrong decision. Another woman. I know she, she was a hospice worker. She knew a lot about end of life. Her mother had been quite abusive and she did a lot of healing internally about the relationship over the course of many years.

[00:32:26] **Laura Davis:** And when her mother got ill and was dying, she knew that there was no way she could be her caregiver, but what she did was she

arranged care for her and she visited her, you know, I think a couple of hours every week in the year or two leading up to her death. And she said for her, that was, that felt like the distance that was appropriate to the relationship.

[00:32:48] **Laura Davis:** And then she said, you know, I thought a lot about what kind of daughter did I want to be. This is what I chose. So I think it's, it's always looking for what is the right level for this particular relationship? Is it never speak to the person again and never see them again? Maybe. Is it what I did? Maybe.

[00:33:03] **Laura Davis:** Is it something in between? Perhaps. There's not one right answer.

[00:33:07] **Laura Reagan:** Right. Again, it's, it's so complex. What the relationship was like, and what has happened since those past hurts for both people. So if someone's considering reconciliation with family members, what would you say about when that should happen? I mean, you've talked a little bit about the work that someone should do, but what needs to happen before really making a decision about that?

[00:33:32] **Laura Davis:** Well, I think, you know, I think one thing is to think about what you're considering doing. Like, let's say you're thinking about visiting your family. And I think the question to ask yourself is will this visit support or derail my healing, you know, and that that'd before any reconciliation happens, there has to be a shifting of boundaries. And, you know, like in many families there's like the way things have always been done. Like in my family, when we get together, I always stay at my parent's house for 10 days, you know, but maybe there's other options. Like maybe it's time to start screening your phone calls or meeting neutral turf, you know, not at someone's home or to have a very short visit.

[00:34:14] **Laura Davis:** Or to stay in a motel instead of at your parents' house or to get together at a neutral time instead of for a traditional holiday, or bring a friend with you, come visit for two hours instead of for a week and, and always to have an escape plan. And I think when you're starting to make these steps, think of each one as an experiment, and then after the experiment you evaluate, how did that go?

[00:34:38] **Laura Davis:** Was that something I would want to repeat? You know, what, where did I fall short, what did I do that I was proud of? When did I dissociate and just kind of lose it? So it's like a learning process. And I think

it's, it's really helpful to work with a therapist to help you sort through those things.

[00:34:53] **Laura Davis:** There could also, you know, you could set ground rules and it could be things like you have to stop telling that story about how wild I was as a teenager. You know, you could no longer talk in front of me about how perfect your husband was. You cannot come into my house unannounced and uninvited, and you know, the survivor can set these unilaterally and they may or may not be respected if they're not respected.

[00:35:17] **Laura Davis:** It's more information about whether to proceed or whether to step back.

[00:35:21] **Laura Reagan:** That's a great point. And I know this is a common thing that happens when we have oftentimes. Childhood trauma, especially if it occurred within the family, that it's very hard to set boundaries. And so you muster up the courage to set them and you think if I set this boundary, then just like with The Courage To Heal book, being written, if I tell them how I need to be treated, then they will do it.

[00:35:47] **Laura Reagan:** But it doesn't really always work out that way because the other person may be defensive. They may deny your reality. There's so many different things that can happen. So I think what I kind of hear you saying is that it's a way to gauge where the other person is in terms of how much they are going to be able to honor your boundaries and respect your truth when you're, when you're trying to navigate these new rules of engagement.

[00:36:16] **Laura Davis:** Yeah. And there was a woman I interviewed many years ago for The Courage To Heal that first book. And I'll never forget her. And because I related so much to what she said, she said that she and her mother. Wrote letters to each other.

[00:36:28] **Laura Davis:** And they both wrote beautiful letters back and forth. And, but when they got together in person, the whole visit would explode. She would regress into some childhood state and it would be horrible. And she, you know, it would within, you know, 24 hours, the whole visit would totally fall apart. And so she would go for a visit.

[00:36:47] **Laura Davis:** It would be horrible. She limp home and she'd have to take months for her to kind of put herself back together. And then she and her mother would start writing letters again. And the letters were beautiful. The



letters were touching. The letters were fun. The letters were had closeness and she'd think, oh, well, maybe it really wasn't so bad.

[00:37:08] **Laura Davis:** And then she would go back for another visit. And then the same cycle would repeat again. And this happened year after year after year. And she said, one day, she just realized, you know what? I have a mother in letters, you know, and she never went to visit her mother again, that. And I, my mother and I had a long correspondence, which is one of the threads in the, in the memoirs, the story of these letters.

[00:37:30] **Laura Davis:** And you know, when you write a letter to someone there's, you don't have to relate in real time. You don't have to respond in real time. You don't have to deal with the other person's emotions in the same way. And you can modulate every word you write, you can rewrite it, you can throw it out and start again.

[00:37:47] **Laura Davis:** And then when you get the letter, I mean, it's just a whole different kind of communication. And so she had a mother in letters and there were a number of years when that's the only kind of mother I had was a mother in letters. And then it grew beyond that, but there was a period of time when that was the only thread between us, you know, there's one other thing we haven't touched on that I think is important is that, you know, there may be someone you just wholeheartedly hate in your family and never want anything to do with.

[00:38:12] **Laura Davis:** And I, you know, there are some people who deserve that, but often. When we think about our family members, our feelings are mixed. You know, we love our mother, but are angry at what she denied us. You know, we, we cherish our son, but resent the years of hell. He put us through, um, one man said, he said, it's hard to talk about the violence and tenderness in my family, because there was so much of both.

[00:38:36] **Laura Davis:** And, you know, so I think, I think reconciliation is often in that, that territory where it's, I love my daughter, but I don't love everything about her. Um, and so how do you have a relationship with someone where these mixed feelings exist? And I think that's much more the norm. Yeah. In many instances.

[00:38:54] **Laura Reagan:** Right.

[00:38:55] **Laura Reagan:** If it's, you know, if it's an extreme. Then now, I guess there are some people who are so abusive, that really is all they are, but

mostly what I see and most people I work with have been abused in some way within their family or experienced some kind of trauma in childhood where their emotional needs weren't attended to well enough afterwards.

[00:39:20] **Laura Reagan:** And. Like I said before, people have, there's a part of them that longs for that relationship, they always wanted with their parent. And then there's a part of them that's really angry. And there's a part of them that feels filled with shame. You know, the feelings that we have are so complicated, it's not just all one thing.

[00:39:38] **Laura Reagan:** And if it is all one thing, we're either probably, you know, seeing someone. In a black and white way, or maybe there's they're being put on a pedestal because so many people who had kind of lonely abandoned childhoods will say that their childhood was great. It was perfect. It was like the Norman Rockwell.

[00:39:59] **Laura Reagan:** You know, and I mean, we know that's just not real. That's not, no family is like that because it's made up of the humans. So there is no perfect, but the mixed feelings can make it so confusing because I, you know, I've seen people feel enraged toward a family member and in the same. You know, 30 minutes, they're also crying for wishing to have a closer relationship.

[00:40:25] **Laura Davis:** That sounds about right.

[00:40:26] **Laura Reagan:** So can you speak a little bit about how did you do that? How did you take care of your mom at the end of her life?

[00:40:34] **Laura Davis:** Well, we, you know, we, there were a lot of stages. Throughout. And one of the things my mother did, which I really give her a lot of credit for us. You know, I had moved 3000 miles away from her when I was a teenager and I really made that move to get away from her largely.

[00:40:50] **Laura Davis:** And I just settled in California and I stayed there. And she was in New Jersey where I had grown up. And so the only times we saw each other, we would have these, I would go visit for like a week. And it would always, I remember I would always end up in her walk-in closet, you know, cursing my nonrefundable, airline tickets, and, you know, it would just be there to be some huge blow up and it would just be like, I was, why the hell did I come here again?

[00:41:12] **Laura Davis:** Just like the woman I just told you about. And at one point, my mother said to me, she said, you know, she said, if we don't create some new experiences in the present, all we will have is a painful past. And so she retired, she was a school social worker. And for years she started going to San Miguel day, end day for the winter.

[00:41:32] **Laura Davis:** She was a snowbird and she called one year when my son Eli was two. And she said, I'm coming out to Santa Cruz for the winter. Which was my town. And she said, don't worry, I'm getting my own place. You'll hardly know I'm there. And I, you know, she didn't ask me, she informed me, which was her way. And I really was, didn't really want her to come, but I didn't feel strongly enough to tell her she couldn't come.

[00:41:56] **Laura Davis:** And she came and she, she did that for nine years and she came for, you know, maybe three or four months, she was super busy. She was like, always had lots of activities and friends. And it was, I almost had to book an appointment to see her. The reality was during those months, we did begin to develop some new positive experiences together.

[00:42:16] **Laura Davis:** And, you know, we bonded around the grandkids. We did some things together that were enjoyable. And I remember this one day in particular, she dropped off her laundry because she didn't have a washer and dryer. And this was maybe six years into this process. And I was doing her laundry. I was working in my office and then I, I work at home and I would go in and do.

[00:42:36] **Laura Davis:** You know her clothes from the washer to the dryer and I was folding them. And I remember in the privacy of that moment, when no one was watching me, I just felt this tenderness. I thought about all the clothes of mine that she had folded when I was an infant and a baby, you know, and a little girl. And I thought about the clothes she had sewed for me.

[00:42:54] **Laura Davis:** And there was just. Reciprocity across the generations that touched me. And so for me, sometimes it was in those little things that I began to, reweave a feeling of connection to her. Um, and when, when she, by the time she came out here at 80, um, we had a pretty, I would say like a cordial but distant relationship, you know, but we didn't, it didn't feel like we were just walking on eggshells with each other anymore.

[00:43:20] **Laura Davis:** But when she came, because she had the beginnings of dementia, the beginnings of dementia looked a lot. Like her worst qualities, you know, she was incredibly anxious. She was rageful. She was mercurial.

She, I never knew who she was going to be when I walked in, she was hostile and it, for me, it triggered all the crap from the past.

[00:43:41] **Laura Davis:** So it was very difficult for me because it felt like it was like a second and then we were fighting. But this time it was, it was not over incest. It was over her independence. You know, she felt like she could live alone. She didn't need any help. I felt like she needed help. I thought she shouldn't be driving.

[00:43:57] **Laura Davis:** She felt like she could be driving. And we went through all that struggle between, you know, adult children and their elderly parents, but it had this backdrop of this history that was still not fully resolved. And, you know, I ended up having to go to therapy, getting back into therapy when I was caring for her, because it just triggered too much for me.

[00:44:16] **Laura Davis:** It just brought up so much. And I really didn't want to be acting towards her out of those past unresolved feelings. I wanted to be able to be present with her in the present. So I really needed help and support to do that. Um, I joined, uh, Alzheimer's support group. I went to therapy, there was a caregivers Alliance.

[00:44:34] **Laura Davis:** I became part of I, I vented a lot. Um, and ultimately I I'm really grateful. I had that opportunity. I'm really grateful. I did it. I think it was the right choice for me.

[00:44:44] **Laura Reagan:** You know, as you're talking about. I think about this short sort of shift of power from that you were the vulnerable child, and now she's the vulnerable adult, you know, at the time when you were taking care of her, you know, and, and when we're so angry at our parents and rightfully saying you were the parent, you were the one that was supposed to be the adult there.

[00:45:05] **Laura Reagan:** Not me. I was the child. In this end of life situation, it's, there's a shift, especially when the person has dementia.

[00:45:13] **Laura Davis:** Yeah.

[00:45:14] **Laura Davis:** And, and, you know, I, I expected with her dementia. I thought for sure that she would become bitter rageful, basically horrible to be around. You know, I thought her worst qualities would be exacerbated, but what actually happened is she turned sweet.

[00:45:29] **Laura Davis:** You know, she, after the fight went and there was a certain point where we were kind of at war. And then the fight went out of her and she became tender and sweet and I would walk into her room and she would just look at me like Laurie, you're the best daughter in the whole world, you know? And then she would say, it's too, it's funny too.

[00:45:47] **Laura Davis:** She'd say things like you and Karen have done such a great job with those kids who says lesbian shouldn't have children. You know, she was funny. She was sweet. And she was saying the things I had longed for all my life. Only it wasn't quite her anymore. So it was a very bittersweet experience. But I did take in that love because underneath her personality structure, which was broken down by the dementia, there was pure love for me.

[00:46:15] **Laura Davis:** And I was really able to take it in.

[00:46:16] **Laura Reagan:** And what a beautiful ending in your relationship, at least during, you know, this on earth, like you said, some times the person has to be gone to be able to really heal the relationship, but. You know, you didn't get the, maybe the death debt bed moment that you mentioned before is so uncommon.

[00:46:36] **Laura Reagan:** But to have those things that you always wanted to hear be said to you is something that's a gift. Well, Laura, this has been a beautiful conversation and I know that many people who are listening are going to want to find your books. So, where would you want people to go to catch up with everything you offer?

[00:46:59] **Laura Reagan:** I know you've, you've given me a lot of info, but what would you want to share just for those who are listening right now?

[00:47:05] **Laura Davis:** How the best place to find me is my website. Which is [Laura.davis.net](http://Laura.davis.net). That's Laura Davis, dot net. You can learn about the memoir I've been talking about. You can read the first five chapters of it for free there.

[00:47:21] **Laura Davis:** If you're a therapist and you're listening, there's, um, there'll be a link in the show notes to a page that talks about using this book as a form of bibliotherapy and all the ways it can support clients or support groups, but in general, it's just a great read. People say they pick it up and they can't put it down.

[00:47:38] **Laura Davis:** I really worked hard on the craft of the book, so it reads like a page turner. And then I do a lot of writing workshops in all kinds of

settings online. In person, I'm taking a group to Tuscany in June. And so all of that, all the things I do to bring writing to other people are also at [lauradavis.net](http://lauradavis.net).

[00:48:00] **Laura Davis:** That's the best place to find me. You'll find my social media on there and everything.

[00:48:04] **Laura Reagan:** Wonderful. And I will include that link to the whole document with much information. In the show notes, but Laura, thank you so much for being my guests on Therapy Chat today.

[00:48:15] **Laura Davis:** Oh, it's been wonderful to talk to you. I feel like we're in a little bubble together having this conversation.

[00:48:21] **Laura Davis:** I love knowing that people are actually listening to us.

[00:48:24] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah.

[00:48:27] **Laura Reagan:** Thank you to Therapy Notes for sponsoring this week's episode. I do love Therapy Notes. It's such an asset to my business and makes my job as a practice owner and a therapist, much easier. Try today with no strings attached to see why everyone is switching to Therapy Notes.

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[00:48:49] **Announcer:** Thank you for listening to Therapy Chat with your host, Laura Reagan LCSW-C.

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