

BECOMING A **SUPERHERO**

A Book For Children Who Have Experienced Trauma



By Miri Bar-Halpern, PsyD

Illustrated by Magali Laitem, PsyD

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FOR THE PARENTS

The word 'trauma' is borrowed from the Greek word for a wound and is used in psychology to describe a wound within a person's soul. A traumatic event can be natural or man-made; hurricanes, floods, and other forces of nature can cause natural trauma. Man-made trauma, on the other hand, is caused by human error or interpersonal human involvement. Childhood trauma is an uncontrollable, terrifying experience that may have a profound effect on a child's future development.

Although most children show resiliency when facing a traumatic event, some might develop symptoms that could interfere with their everyday functioning. Furthermore, some events cause disruption to daily routine, and can affect the attachment relationship between the parent and the child and lead to anxiety and stress within the family system as a whole. The extent of symptoms following a traumatic event is broad and can vary from one child to another. It is the result of the interplay of pre-existing vulnerabilities and stressors, age, gender, proximity to the event, the type of exposure (direct vs. indirect), the nature of the support in the aftermath, and the attachment to the parents.

Younger children may have difficulty expressing their feelings in a verbal manner. Some children may experience nightmares or recurrent dreams about the event. As a result, they may have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. Others may exhibit behavioral problems such as anger, aggression, risky behavior, failing at school, crying, and irritability. Children may exhibit generalized fears or they may try to avoid places that remind them of a specific event or a frightening situation related to it.

Older children can use their verbal abilities to express their stress. They are more likely to tell the story of the traumatic event repeatedly and may display a desire for revenge. They may be distracted easily, have a hard time concentrating, become fearful, and hyper vigilant.

Regardless of the age group, it is important to remember that a traumatic event may affect the whole family, and that children rely on their caregivers for support and guidance. The attachment of children to their parents is one of the most important resiliency factors! When facing a traumatic event, children look to their parents on how

to interpret the situation. Parents who are responsive to their children's needs and are available to them in dangerous situations will help their children recover and adapt. Furthermore, children learn how to regulate their emotional experiences through their attachment to their parents.

This book was created to help children who have experienced trauma. It is a resource for you and your child to refer to in times of everyday stress and fear. It incorporates techniques from various interventions that were found to be most helpful for young children who suffer from post-traumatic symptoms (like the symptoms described above). For example, muscles relaxation techniques, deep breathing, and mindfulness. This book also has a component of affect expression, identification of feelings, and emotion regulation. The "Boom" is a metaphor for scary events your child may experience and therefore can help explore different fears that your child may have. This book will help lower some of these fears and anxieties through learning coping skills. Finally, through reading the book with your child, following the exercises and the discussion, you will feel closer to one another and your child will learn that they have someone to rely on.

IMPORTANT: Before reading this book with your child, refer to the end of the book for suggestions, guidance, instructions, best practices, and alternative techniques.

Let's begin our journey to become superheroes!

Miri Bar-Halpern, PsyD



FOR THERAPISTS

This book can be used both as prevention and intervention when working with children who have experienced a traumatic event.

This book was created following a literature review that examined trauma related interventions. The intervention components that were found to be most helpful with this population around the world were integrated in this book. You will find techniques such as psychoeducation about trauma and emotion identification, the development of coping skills and affect regulation, and mindfulness activities. These components were based on cognitive and behavioral interventions such as TF-CBT – Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), TARGET-Trauma, and Affect Regulation Guide for Education and Therapy (Ford & Russo, 2006), and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (Miller & Linehan, 2007).

Reading books with children can help develop the reader-listener relationship, help open new communication channels, and develop interpersonal skills in a creative and fun method. Reading this book during therapy can aid assessment, allowing the therapist an opportunity to observe what the client identifies with and the reaction of the child during different parts of the story. The therapist will also learn something about the child's competence as they learn the skills that are taught in this book. "Becoming a Superhero" includes bibliotherapy techniques that have been identified by research to help the book be more attractive and useful to children. Finally, there is a separate chapter that provides methods of adapting this book to the child's developmental level and alternative skill-building activities.

The goal is that the more children practice the activities in this book their ability to regulate their emotions will improve. After reading the book and practicing the skills, it is expected that children will know how to identify emotions, trauma reminders, and the way they can affect their body. It is also expected that children will have a variety of skills to regulate their emotional and physical sensations. Finally, it is hoped that this book will open a discussion between the therapist, the parent, and the child.

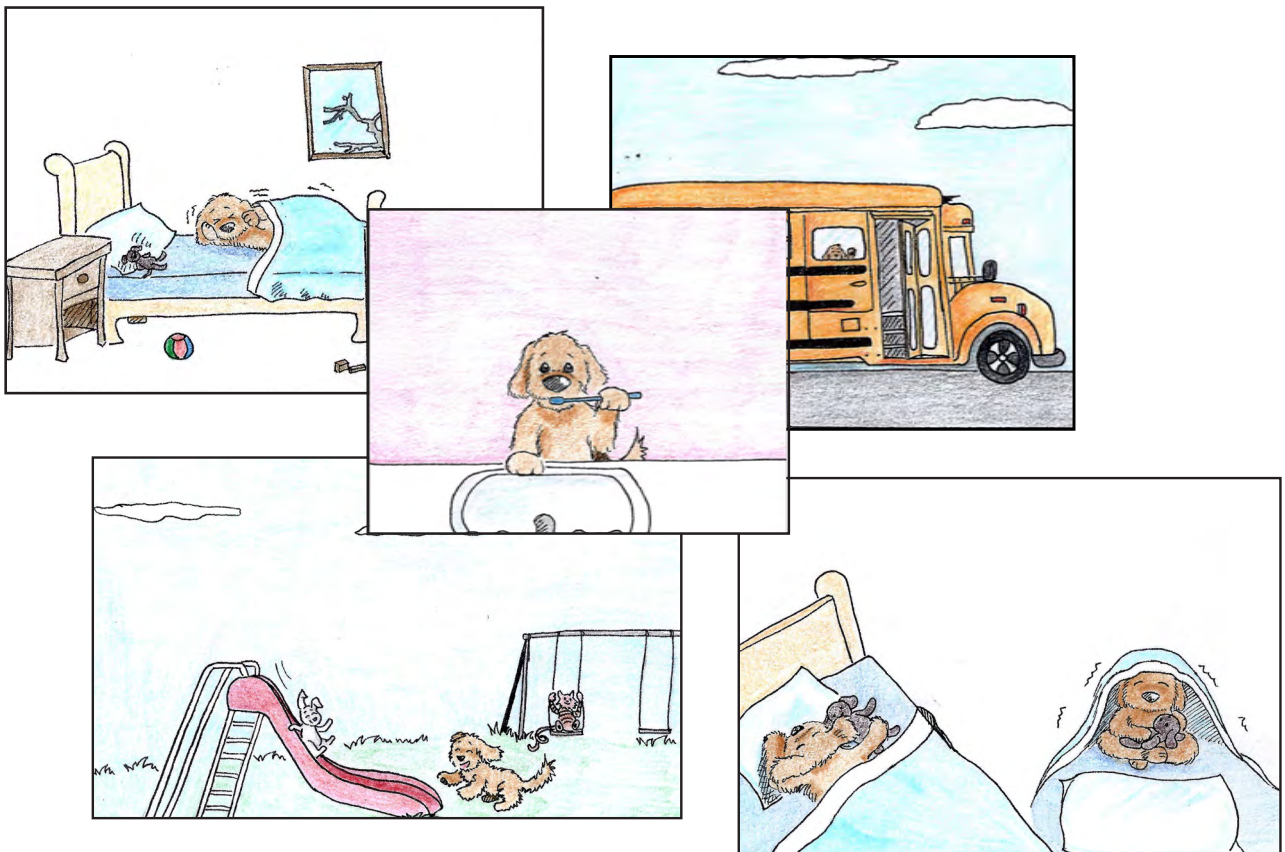
So let's start our journey of becoming superheroes...

It was the middle of the night. Billy was sleeping in his warm bed dreaming about his favorite place.

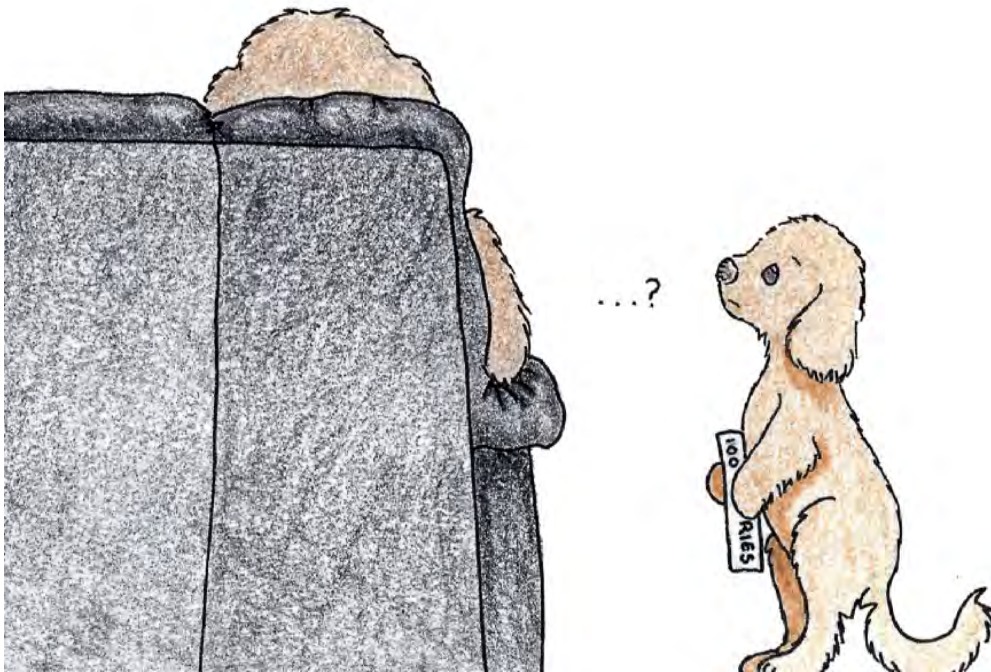
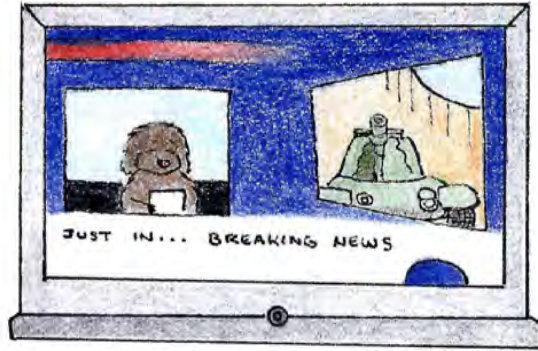


All of a sudden, Billy woke up to the loud sound of a **"BOOM."**

Billy hears the **"BOOM"** many times; when he brushes his teeth in the morning, on his way to school, and when he is playing outside with his friends. Sometimes the **"BOOM"** is real, but sometimes it is a memory.

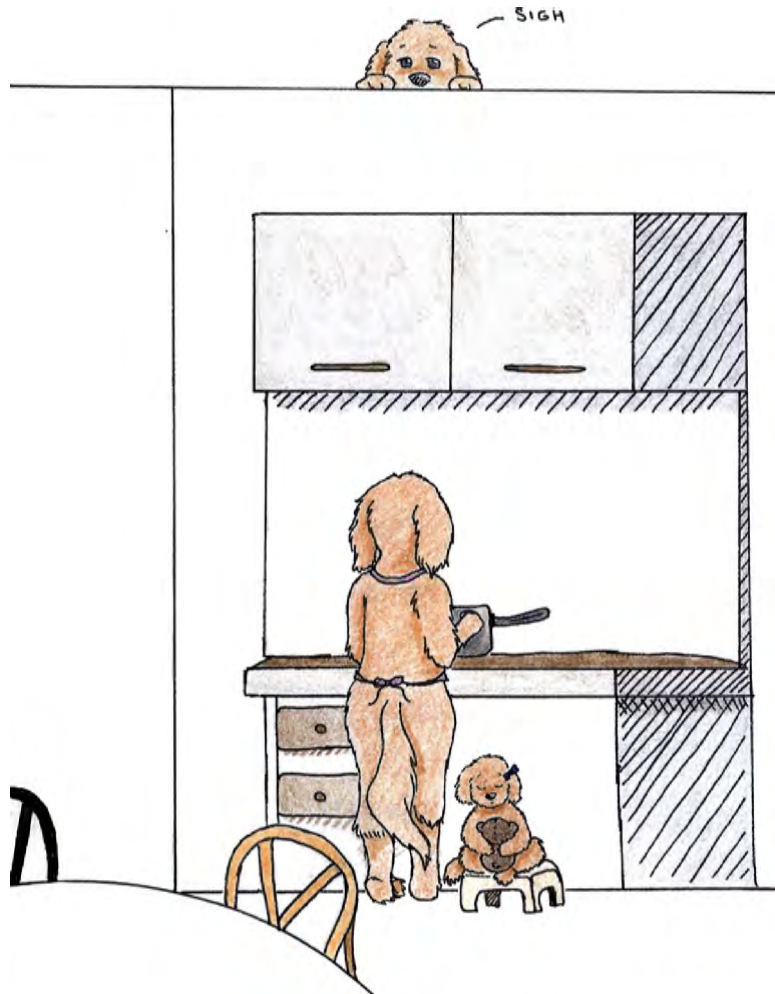


Billy thinks his parents are also scared of the "**BOOM**" because their behavior changes.



Lately, his father watches TV all day...

His mother seldom leaves the house now...
and his younger sister doesn't want to sleep alone.



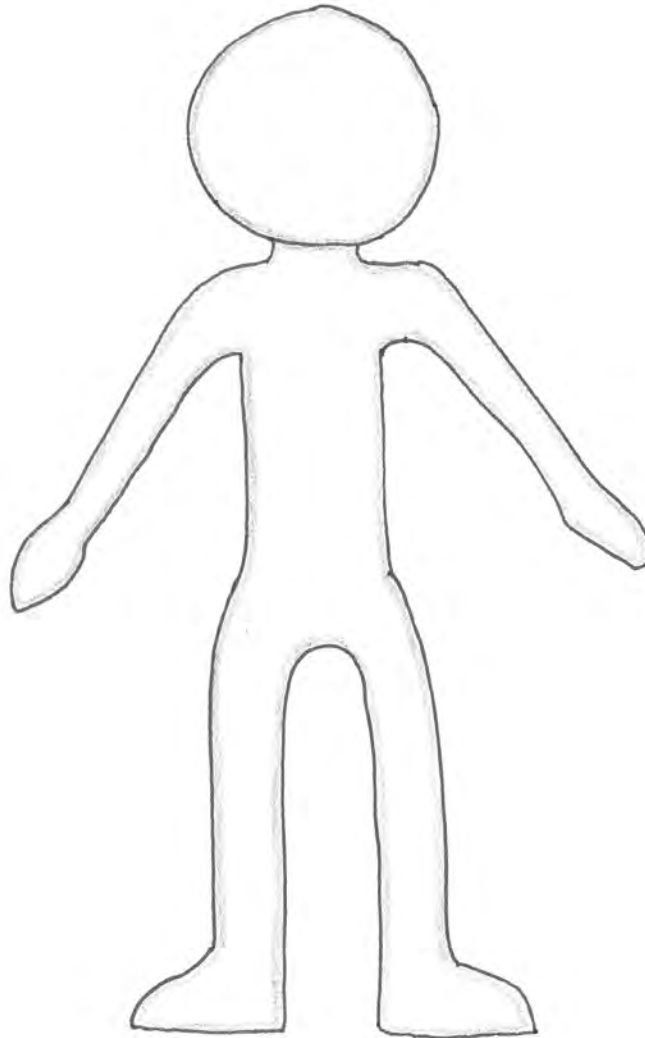
Billy has many worries in his head, but mostly
he wants to know who will protect his
family and if he will be safe.

When Billy is worried, his stomach has butterflies, his hands shake, and he feels nervous to the tip of his toes...What about you?

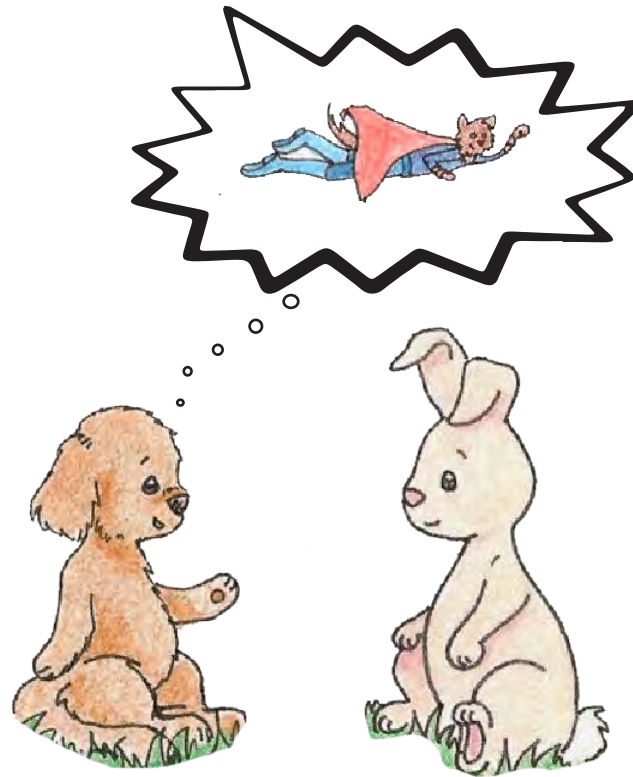


WHERE ARE MY FEELINGS IN MY BODY?

(Scared, Happy, Surprised, Sad, Confused,
Angry, Embarrassed, Excited, Lonely)?



This morning Billy decides something needs to change, so he goes in search of a superhero to help him and his family.



Billy calls his best friend, Mia, and tells her his plan. Mia is happy to join Billy in his search and the two friends begin their journey.

They walk and walk and walk until they reach the forest. The forest is dark and they hear many scary sounds.



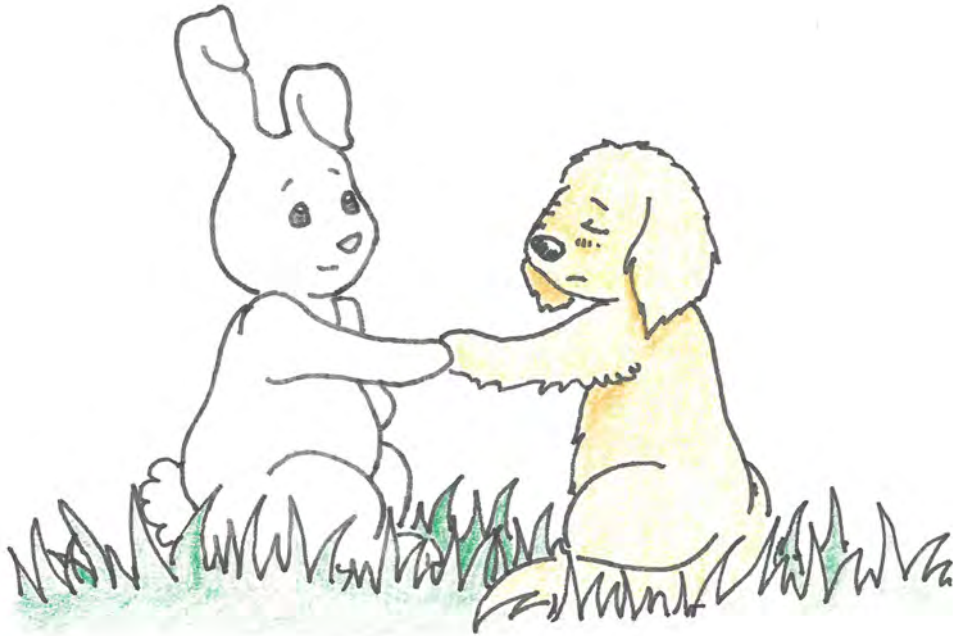
Billy is scared! His heart is pounding fast. His muscles suddenly get tight. He feels sweat on the palms of his hands. He is shaking...

Everyone is afraid sometimes.
What are you afraid of?

LIST YOUR FEARS...

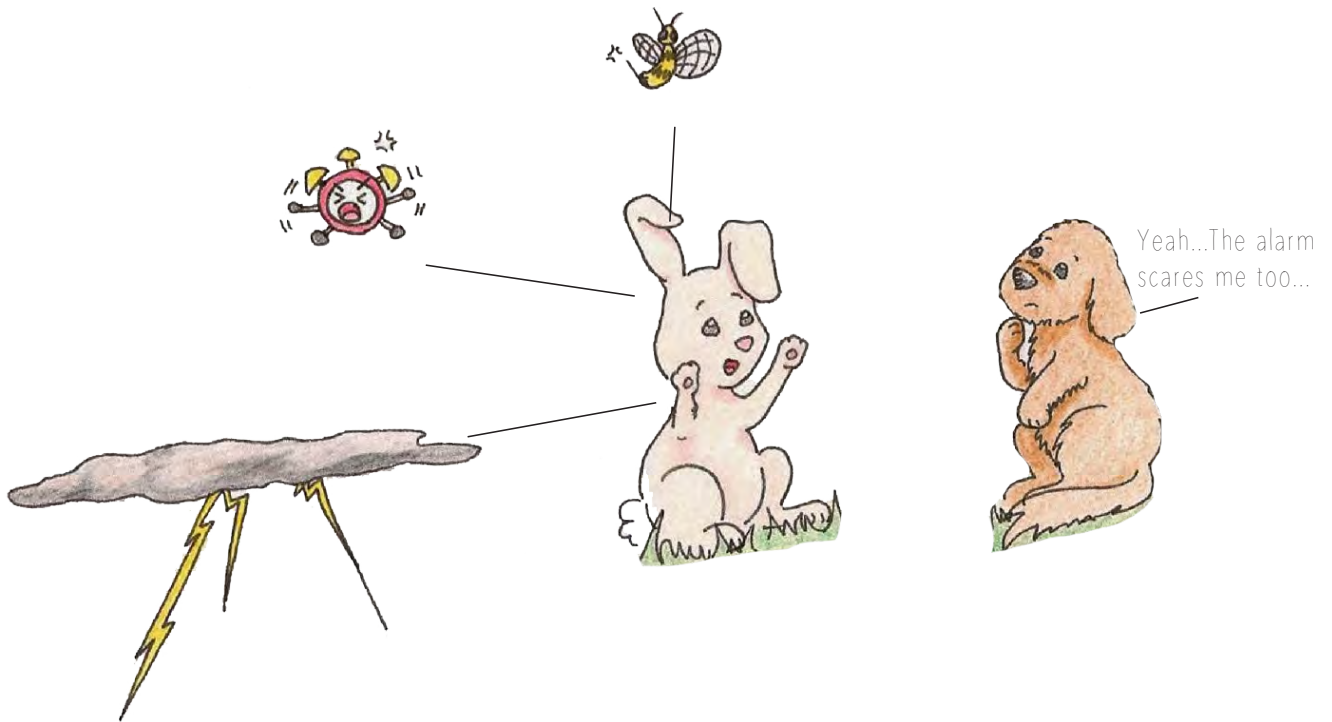


"Don't be scared," Mia says.



"That's easy for you to say! You're not afraid of anything!" says Billy to Mia, whom he has always seen as the bravest in their class.

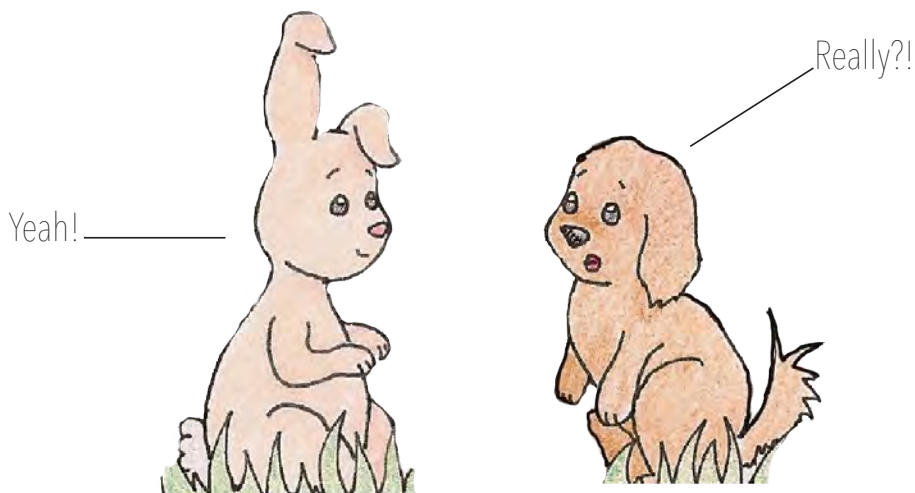
"That's not true. I'm scared of many things. I'm scared of lightning, bees, and asking the teacher questions in front of other kids."



"But most of all I am scared of loud noises like the **"BOOM."**

Billy is very surprised. He always thought he was the only one who was scared of the "**BOOM**." It is nice to know that his friend feels the same.

"Billy, I'll teach you a trick that helps me feel better when I'm scared," says Mia.



"First, take a deep breath. Now, I want you to count 5 things that you see, 4 things that you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and one thing you can taste."



Billy feels better now. His heart is no longer pounding, his breath is slower, and his muscles are more relaxed... To Billy's surprise, he isn't thinking about being scared anymore and the two friends continue on their journey.



All of a sudden, they hear a loud noise coming from above. Mia, who isn't expecting the noise, jumps and hides. This time Billy isn't scared. He recognizes the sound of their friend, Owl.

Billy thinks Owl will know where they can find a superhero. Billy takes Mia's hand and they walk to Owl together.

"I don't know why I got so scared," says Mia to Billy. "It's weird. I know Owl will not hurt me, but I am still feeling scared in my body."

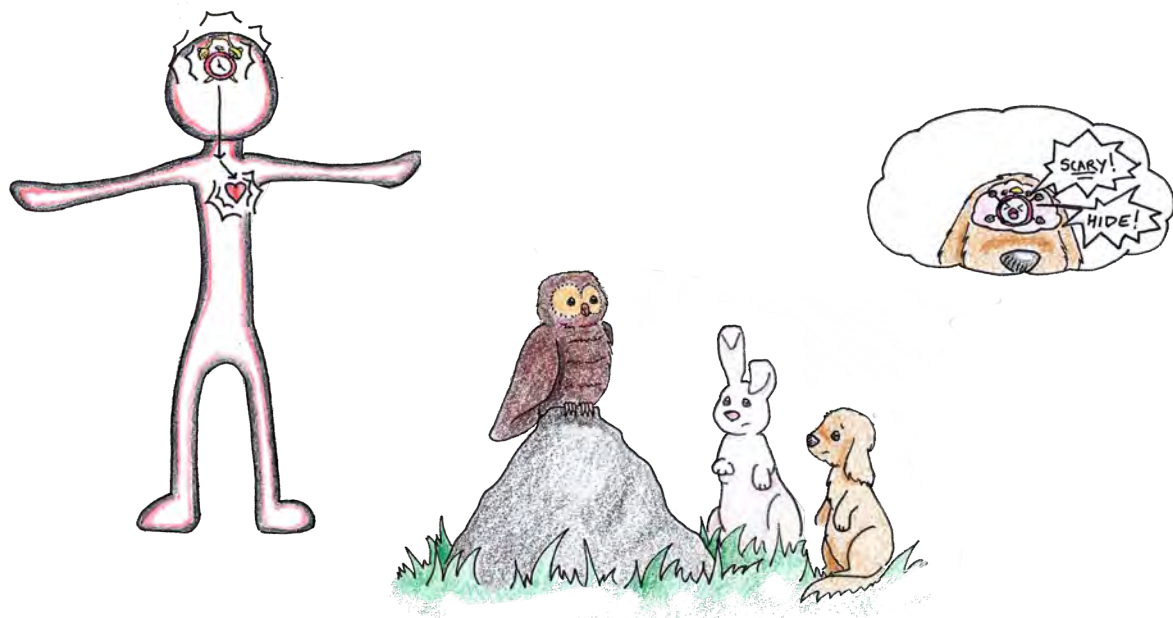


Owl smiles and explains. "Sometimes when we hear or see something and we are not sure what it is, our body reacts for us. This is our alarm system."

"Oh no, another loud noise. I hate alarms!" says Mia.

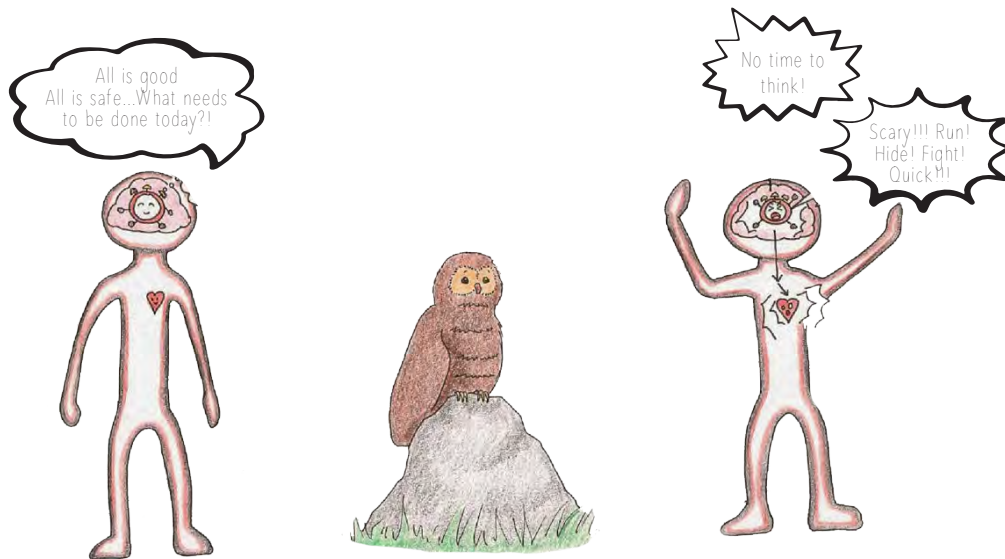
"This alarm system is very special. It is in our minds. Sometimes hearing an alarm is a good thing because it keeps us safe," says Owl.

"The alarm tells you to **hide** or to **fight**," says Owl.



"Sometimes, when we are very scared, the alarm is very loud and we can't focus, so every time we try to think about something else it just rings more and we get confused."

“You know, I hear this alarm in my head all the time. It’s as if I can’t hear anything else,” says Mia. “How can I make it stop?”



“The alarm is turned on by a trigger. Everyone has different triggers. When you heard my voice, it reminded you that you are afraid of loud noises,” says Owl.

“If you know what triggers turn on your alarm,
you can figure out when danger is real
and when it is imagined.”

What are your triggers?

LIST YOUR TRIGGERS...

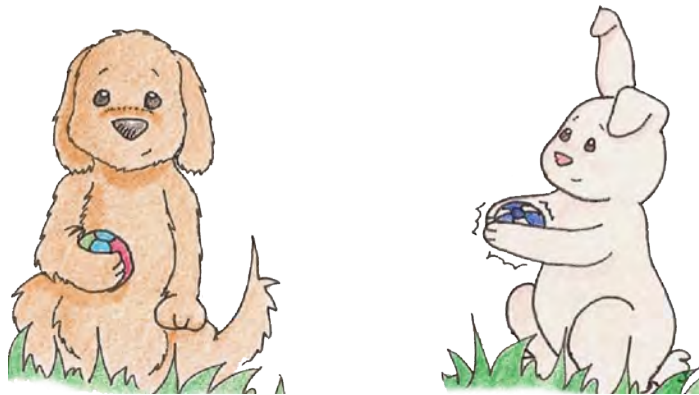


"But not to worry! I will teach you both a trick that will help you re-set the alarm and concentrate," Owl tells them.



"Sit comfortably, take a deep breath, and close your eyes."

“First, we are going to pretend that you have a ball in your hands. I want you to squeeze it really hard! Feel the pressure in your hand and in your arm as you squeeze it. Now drop the ball and notice how your muscles are relaxed. See how much better your hands feel?”



“Try it again. Squeeze really, really hard... just a little bit more. Now relax. How was that?”

“Okay, are you ready for the second exercise? Pretend that you just got up in the morning and you want to stretch so you can reach the sun.”

“Stretch your arms in front of you, up high over your head toward the sun... almost touching it... all the way up, stretch higher! Now let your arms drop back to your side.”



“Now stretch again, up, up, up to the sun. Hold tight and notice the tension in your hands and shoulders... now let them drop quickly. It feels good, right?”

“Great! Now let’s try another exercise. Pretend that you’re a snail sitting outside.”



“Uh-oh! All of sudden you hear the **‘BOOM’** and you sense danger! Curl back into your shell and hide... pull your shoulders up to your ears and push your head down. Hold it tight! Hold it!”

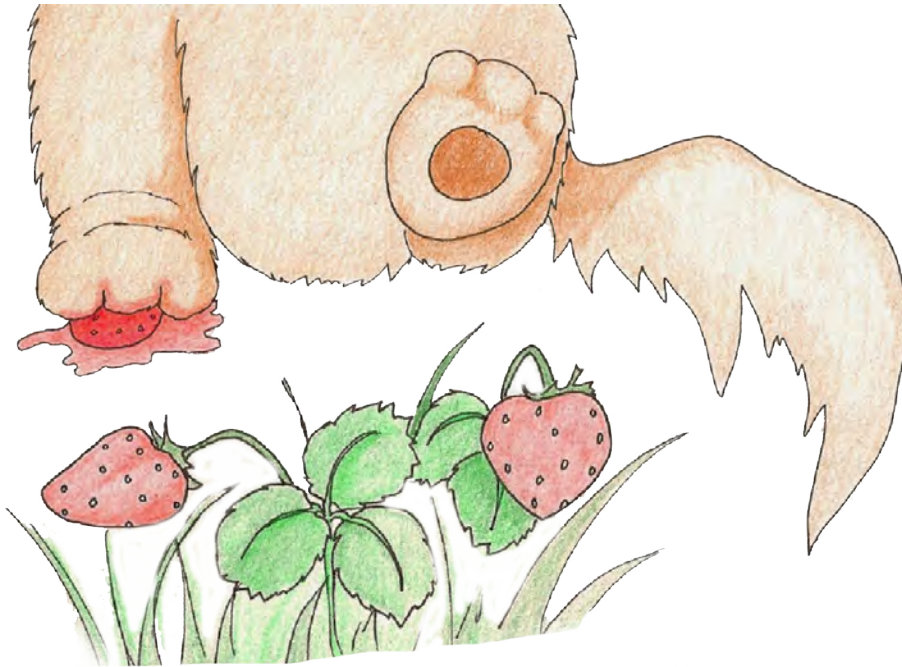


“Now let go. The danger is gone and you can play outside again. You can feel relaxed and safe.”

“Oh, watch out now, the alarm is on again! Push your shoulders way up to your ears and hold it!”

“Ok you can relax now, bring your head out, and let your shoulders relax.”

“Here is the last exercise. Pretend that you are standing barefoot on a pile of strawberries. Squish your toes deep into the strawberries and feel how they splash everywhere. Try to get your feet to the bottom. Push down with your legs.”



“Relax your feet, let your toes go loose and feel how nice it is. Slowly open your eyes,” says Owl.

“That feels warm and tingly,” says Billy. “It makes me feel relaxed all over my body,” says Mia.

Owl smiles, "Sometimes you have to make yourself tighter before you can relax, but if you practice it before you go to sleep every night it will help."



"Owl, you are so smart. Can you be our superhero?" asks Billy.

"I am sorry, Billy, but I can't leave the forest. My power is that I can teach you new things."

Billy and Mia say goodbye to Owl and continue on their journey. Billy, who is more relaxed after doing the exercises, suddenly notices the flowers and the trees. He notices the sun outside and - hey, what is that? It's Ms. Butterfly!



Ms. Butterfly spreads her wings so all of her colors are clear and bright.

Billy touches the pink color. He feels like the pink color fills him with a warm fuzzy feeling inside.



The pink color comes up from his toes, pours itself into his legs, warms up his stomach, and spreads to his hands and fingers. Then the pink goes all the way up to his head and makes Billy smile.



Mia notices how the yellow color feels like it is tickling her toes, going up her legs, making her stomach laugh, and spreading to her hands. It continues to spread into her face, warming the inside of her eyes and tickling her eye lashes.

The blue color feels like summer wind. They both take a deep breath of blue and imagine a cool wind spreading from head to toe.



Blue sits in their stomachs for a few seconds making them feel warm and full, then continues all the way down to their legs, feet, and finally to their toes.

“Ms. Butterfly, your colors make everyone so relaxed and you can fly... maybe you can be our superhero?” asks Billy.



“I am sorry,” says Ms. Butterfly, “but I can’t be your superhero. I need to be near my flowers. Maybe you can think of my colors, one at a time, and it will help you be calm and relaxed.”

Billy and Mia continue walking until they get to a lake where they meet Blowfish.

Blowfish, who doesn't recognize the two visitors, is scared and starts to blow and blow and blow and he becomes bigger and bigger and his barbs become sharper and sharper.

"Don't be scared," says Mia "we want you to be our superhero."

"Superhero?" says Blowfish, "I can't leave the water. This is my home."

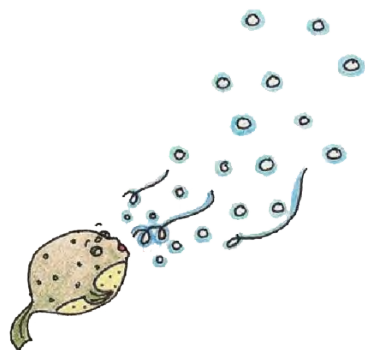
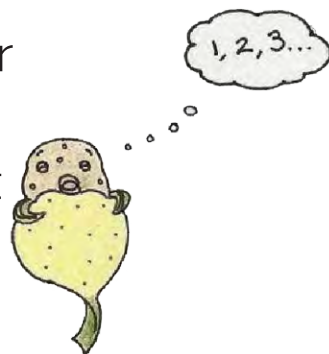


"Well, maybe you can teach us how to protect ourselves like you do?" Mia asks the fish.



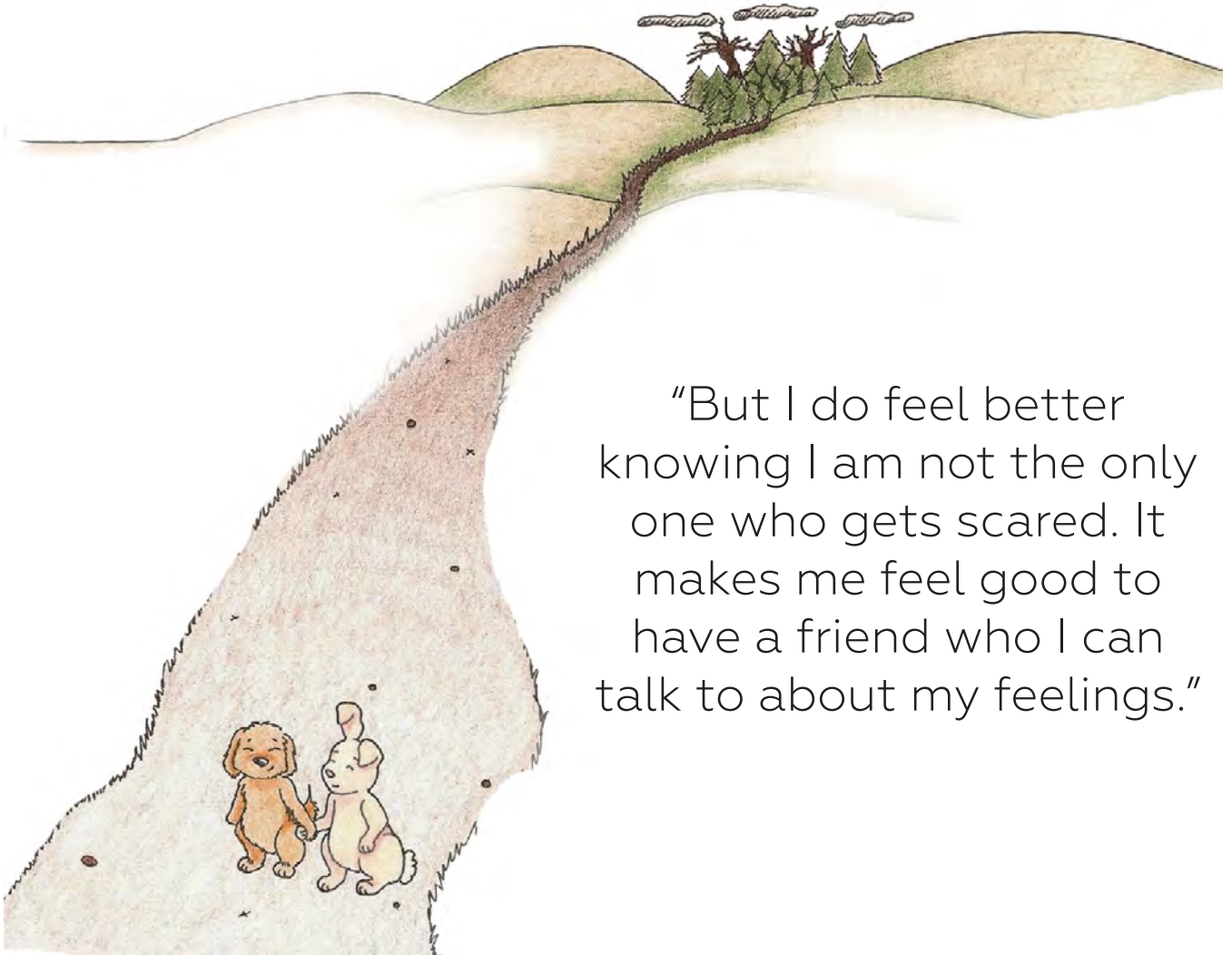
"That's easy. Follow me! Put your hands on your stomach. Take a deep breath through your nose and feel the air as it enters your stomach and makes it bigger and bigger! Imagine your stomach is a big balloon."

"Now let the air out slowly through your mouth and notice how the air escapes and your stomach gets smaller. Repeat this a few times and you'll notice that you feel more relaxed".



Blowfish explains, "When I am relaxed I can think better. I can look at my surroundings and decide if there is a danger. With both my feelings and my thoughts, I can decide what to do next in a smart way."

It's starting to get dark, so Billy and Mia return home.
"I'm sorry we couldn't find a superhero, Billy," says Mia.



"But I do feel better knowing I am not the only one who gets scared. It makes me feel good to have a friend who I can talk to about my feelings."



Billy's mom is waiting and hugs him as he comes in. She notices that Billy is sad.

"What's wrong, Billy?" asks his mother.

"I'm sad because I couldn't find a superhero to help us when we are scared," Billy shares with his mom.

Billy tells his mother about being in the forest with Mia and feeling scared and learning to pay attention to his senses. He tells her about his meeting with Owl and learning that there is an alarm in his body and he can relax his muscles so they will not hurt.



Billy also tells his mother about Ms. Butterfly and Blowfish and how they taught him how to think about one thing at a time and to take deep breaths.

While telling his mother about his adventures, Billy starts to feel better. His muscles are not tense, his breath is slower, and he feels safe and relaxed.



Billy teaches the rest of his family the new things he has learned and it makes him feel proud. The more they all repeat the exercises together, the better they feel.



Billy is happy and he's not looking for a superhero anymore. He realizes he's the superhero now!

READ THIS BEFORE YOU SHARE THIS STORY HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The fears that Billy and Mia have are common among children who experience trauma. Before starting to read the story (or after the first few pages), ask your child what he or she knows about terror and what types of “BOOM” he or she is familiar with. Try to promote a discussion with your child about their fears. Remember, the “BOOM” is a metaphor for any scary event or trauma.

Page 9 offers an activity for you and your child to label feelings and to discuss how they feel in their body. Ask your child to choose a color for each feeling and then write the feeling in the body figure according to where they sense the feeling (therapists have permission to copy the body figure, or draw one free hand). The rationale behind this activity is to help your child make the connection between their body's responses and their feelings. This will help your child in the process of regulating emotions by focusing on regulating the body's response. You can also ask your child to draw a picture showing how they feel when they are happy/sad/scared/surprised/angry. At the same time, you can draw your own picture and explain to your child that different people show their feelings in different ways. If your child likes to play pretend, you can have them act out a feeling while you guess what it is.

Page 12 offers a great opportunity to talk with your child about fears. Emphasize to your child that everyone gets scared, just like Mia and Billy, and it is ok. Make a list with your child of all their fears and then address them one at a time. Your child will be less overwhelmed and less inclined to think about all their fears at once. If you feel creative, make a “soothing box” with your child. Take a shoebox and decorate it together. Inside the box you can put different items that calm your child - favorite CD's, a stuffed puppet, a stress ball, candies, coloring book and, of course, this book.

Page 16 is a mindfulness activity. It will help your child become more aware of their environment, the “here and now”, and will distract your child from thinking about fears. Repeat this exercise with your child in different places.

Page 21 discusses triggers. Similar to fears, children may have different triggers that turn on their “alarm”. With your child, create a “Trigger Thermometer”. At the top, write, or draw, what triggers your child experiences the most. At the bottom, write, or draw, what makes your child calm down. Use the “Trigger Thermometer” to talk with your child about the different behaviors he or she might display in reaction to each trigger.

Pages 22-26 are examples of a muscle relaxation technique. Make sure your child is sitting comfortably: feet on the floor, hands relaxed and eyes closed. Follow Owl's instructions with your child. This will help your child to release tension in their body. Together, discuss how their body feels when they are stressed compared to when they are relaxed.

Pages 29-30 contain guided imagery activities. Your child will learn to concentrate on one thing at a time. Focusing on the colors will help distract your child from feelings of stress and anxiety. Ask your child to observe and describe something in the immediate environment such as a room, picture, or flower. You can also ask your child to close their eyes and think of their favorite place. Ask them to describe what it feels like there, the smell of the place, the weather, and what they're doing there.

Page 33 is a deep breathing exercise. Ask your child to put their hands on their stomach while doing this exercise. Help your child become aware of the movement of their stomach while inhaling and exhaling (you can even ask your child to lie down and put a piece of paper on their stomach so they can see the movement). Another way to practice deep breathing is to pretend your child's stomach is a balloon that you are blowing air into. Tell your child that with each breath you breath into the "balloon", their stomach will become fuller and expand. Next, tell them that you took the air out of the balloon and ask them to let go of all the air in their stomach slowly.

This book aims to help young children, ages four to eight, but may be helpful with slightly older children too. Adjust this book to meet your child's needs. You don't have to read it all at once! Younger children might need a break between sections because they have a harder time concentrating.

Follow your child's lead and choose the activities they are most interested in completing. You can repeat the stories and the activities multiple times with your child. The more you practice with your child, the better they will become at knowing how to handle future situations. You can even adapt these exercises to other times when your child is stressed or anxious.

Ask your child to teach these exercises to other family members, just like Billy does. This promotes a sense of self-efficacy within the child and will promote participation of the family as a whole.

And most importantly - talk with your child! Try to learn more about their inner world, feelings, fears, and remind your child that there is a superhero inside of them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miri Bar-Halpern, PsyD, is a staff psychologist at McLean Hospital. She is also an Instructor in Psychology at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Bar-Halpern has specialized interest in trauma informed care. She has developed training seminars and presented in numerous conferences on this topic. She has published several chapters and articles about trauma and emotion regulation and her book, *Becoming a Superhero: The Development of a Book For Children Who Have Been Exposed to Terrorist Attacks*, has been published outside of the USA. Other areas of expertise include acute residential and outpatient treatment for severe psychiatric conditions, and diagnosing and treating adolescents and young adults who struggle with emotional dysregulation, anxiety, depression, trauma, and suicidal behaviors. Dr. Bar-Halpern highly values multicultural treatment and has extensive training and experience using several treatment modalities including dialectical behavior therapy, family therapy, and cognitive behavior therapy.

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Illustrated by Magali Laitem, PsyD

"This unique book tells a story with engaging pictures and characters that provides a sensitive and science-based explanation for children about how they and their families can understand and overcome the psychological hurt that can occur to anyone when terrible events happen. It is a valuable source of reassurance and hope for any child or family affected by trauma."

Julian D. Ford, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center

"Dr. Bar-Halpern gives the children of our generation an invaluable resource for overcoming the emotional traumas experienced by so many in the face of terrorism. The fears and triumphs the main character experiences will resonate with children, who can practice with "Billy" as he develops skills to cope throughout his adventure. Parents, teachers and therapists will quickly recognize *Becoming a Superhero* as a vital guide for helping children develop resilience in the face of all kinds of traumas."

Christopher J. Pagano, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist, Harvard Medical School

"There is no better way to deliver messages to young children than through play and books. This book provides a creative integration of the knowledge of resilience and its clinical application. The book is playful and will be useful to parents and young children and to clinicians and educators alike. The engaging style is especially valuable for young children experiencing a range of psychological trauma. I believe this book can become a resource for all people involved in early childhood education."

*Ruth Pat-Horenczyk, Ph.D., Director of Child & Adolescent Services,
Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma*

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