Welcome back. This is Jen Lee, the creator and host of I Need Blue. Survivors Talk Surviving. Visit **www.ineedblue.net** for additional stories. As you listen, if the message moves you, rate and review it on Apple podcasts and Spotify so more people can find it. Share it with friends and family. The more we share, the more we learn, and the more we can help. **Interested in** **being part of the message?** Sponsorships/advertising packages available online.

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4 years ago today, February 14th 2018, a 19 year old walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. He opened fire, killing 17 people, and injuring 17 others. The gunman, a former student, fled the scene on foot by blending in with other students, and was arrested without incident about an hour later in nearby Coral Springs.

The Parkland shooting, this killing spree, is the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history. The gunman pleaded guilty and apologized. The perpetrators sentence will be determined this month.

Today’s guest, Dr Michele Finneran, Ph.D., is an Author, Psychotherapist, and Mental Health Advocate. Her expertise was called upon by some students from the Parkland shooting who were in needed of coping and dealing with this unforeseen trauma. Survivors of the shooting, teachers and students alike, have struggled with [survivor's guilt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survivor_guilt) and other symptoms of [post-traumatic stress disorder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-traumatic_stress_disorder) (PTSD). Today’s discussion is about the discoveries Dr. Finneran learned, while helping these victims navigate a new normal; the images, sounds, sights, and horror seen by innocent victims, children really.

I’m sure like me, many of you watched these crazy events unfold on TV. Standing in disbelief at the images unfolding. Perhaps, double checking with your kids to make sure they were ok, no matter what state or city you were in or sending that “I love you” text as you were reminded how quickly life changes. Moments of fear and tragedy witnessed can have a devastating effect on one’s life.

Dr Finneran is here to shed light on the depth of this trauma. She has helped some victims begin the journey of becoming survivors. Using traditional practices and some unique to her, she guides us through what the students witnessed that day and how professionals such as herself, provide healing and coping tools to manage the trauma.

I am honored to introduce Dr Michele Finneran. Thank you for being my guest today.

Dr. Finneran

With a Ph.D in Conflict Resolution/Dispute Analysis from Nova Southeastern University, Dr. Finneran is licensed to practice in Florida. Her research and experience focus on the topic of domestic abuse populations. She also emphasizes thought and mood disorders, as well as psychological and emotional issues in her clinical, private practice. Dr. Finneran’s clinical practice is made up of a diverse population from pre-teens to adults. Many clients that Dr. Finneran treats are First Responders: law enforcement, police detectives, firefighters/EMT’s/paramedics, nurses, and medical personnel.

**Driven by her mental health advocacy, Dr. Finneran now seeks to educate and inform others on her findings regarding mental health, especially on the topic of domestic abuse by being open to nearly all speaking and educational events and opportunities for professionals alike. Early on Dr Finneran knew this was what she wanted to do.**

Jen

How did you know this is what you wanted to do? Did something happen?

Dr. Finneran

When I was very young, my dad would talk to me about his life and the trauma he experienced at a young age. I didn't have the coping skills or the techniques to help him. What he was sharing was a little age inappropriate. I became an empathetic listener; I wanted to help him with his pain. I was the person people turned to when they needed to talk. They felt comfortable sharing their issues and problems.

When I went to Stetson, studying for my undergrad, I worked in the crisis stabilization unit, where I worked with severe mental health clients who were in crisis. I had such compassion inside me while working with these people who were struggling. What I felt was a different level of empathy and compassion. As I went through my journey academically, I learned techniques, skills, and mechanisms to put in place to help them. You must be more than an empathic therapist. You must understand how the use of techniques, the skills, and the training behind the empathy to create an effective treatment.

Jen

What is the main form of practice that you have right now?

Dr Finneran

I am more of a cognitive behavioral therapist, our REBT, Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy. It is an action-oriented approach that's focused on helping people deal with irrational beliefs and learn how to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in a healthier, more realistic way.

I really work cognitively with my clients to make sure their thinking and perspective is healthy.

Jen

Can you tell me how the past 2 years has affected the mental health?

Dr Finneran

As a provider, it is overwhelming to see what is happening with mental health. On a personal level, seeing so many people struggle the way they have been with their mental health is hard.

As we go through the variants, we suit back up, mask up, and prepare ourselves to be healthy. I never thought it would ever get to this severe level. I’ve seen chronic mental health, but this has taken it to a new level. The struggle is real.

Teachers have had a hard time. They really struggled having to re-adjust and develop a completely different skill set than what they were accustomed to. With my teen clients, I would see them in the beginning of the week, and then I would do a follow-up check at the end of the week; they really struggled. People think our teens should be resilient, but this is something which is hard for anybody, particularly our teens, to bounce back from. They were affected socially from this situation.

*The skyrocketing topics I felt elevated during the pandemic were: domestic violence, substance abuse/addiction/dependency and suicide.*

Jen

What piece of advice would you give a family who has a teenager on how to help them cope and work through it?

Dr Finneran

I really do feel putting down the technology, putting down the social media and emotionally checking in with them is important. Not a surface check in, but really taking the time and talking to your teens. I feel like at times they are left to their own devices and that’s dangerous. They are teens and need the structure, they need the routine, they need the guidance, and they need the monitoring. A lot of them are not getting this and when they don’t have that, it’s almost like a free for all in their minds and behaviors.

Being a teen is a hard with everything happening biologically, hormonally, peer to peer pressure, etc. I really do feel like a sit-down family meeting, not a family dinner, but a family meeting, to talk about the week and to prepare for the week ahead. Talk about any type of obstacles or barriers that their teens may be experiencing. I really get into the thick of it. Don’t leave your teens to their own devices because if that happens for too long, they end up in trouble and then we wonder why?

Jen

It's like social media becomes their therapy.

Let’s talk about your experience with some of the Parkland school shooting survivors. It’s hard to believe it was 4 years ago today.

Dr. Finneran

For me, living right next to the community and being someone who is treating some members in the community, it really hit on a personal level, and it shook me on a professional level as a therapist. It shook me to the core. When I went to school, Jen, I wasn't trained on these types of catastrophes. I had to get additional training. Back when I went to school, there was no kind of education on how to how to handle a school shooting, how to help victims and families through this type of disaster.

I had to take my own personal training and school myself on the traumatization of something like this happening. On a personal level, a professional level and being a member of this community and business owner right next door to Parkland, it shook me to my core. Seeing families and students which were impacted in the building, is something I can't even describe. I don't even know how to articulate it. It was something I've never seen before and nothing I've ever experienced before. It struck a different chord in me. I've heard a lot of things and I've seen a lot of things but I have never in my life, had something hit so close to home.

Jen

What moment shook you to the core?

Dr Finneran

The day it happened. I was in therapy with a parent of a student in Parkland the day it happened, February 14. I was sitting there having counseling with her and her phone was blowing up in the session. She was looking at her phone and I asked her if everything was, ok? She said, “I don’t know. I don’t think so. There is something happening with my child. I'm not sure what's going on. I’m going to have to leave the session.”

I said, “Go! Take care of your child, your teen.

I knew something was going on and it wasn’t sitting well with me based upon the parents’ expression and vibe I felt while she was receiving all those texts. I went downstairs into the lounge and turned on the news. I witnessed something I hadn’t seen before on the news in real time, and I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t take my eyes off the TV. I couldn’t believe this is happening and my patient was a parent of a child that was in Parkland during this.

I canceled my appointments the rest of the day so I could debrief myself on what was going on and happening in the moment. Watching the law enforcement going in, students running out and everything that was on the news and being reported was something I will never forget. I will never forget the feeling I had that day, in that moment, with the parent. What we experienced together was a feeling that cannot be diminished or eliminated from me or my work.

Jen

Wow, thank you for sharing that. You literally experienced what a parent felt in that moment. You witnessed what they were going through; the text, the anguish, as they were getting the texts from their teen at Parkland High School. when they were getting the tax or when they turned on the TV like you were there. And you saw one of the parents while I can understand how that showed you to the core?

Dr. Finneran

I followed up with their parent. Their teen is ok. However, a lot of teens weren't. A lot of our teens were wounded teens. Teachers and some administrators had passed because of the shooting. A trauma was witnessed, a lot of traumas was felt and during that day whether you were in the building or not in the building. Images of news reporters bombarding the school and, in the kids’, faces, teachers trying to navigate and help their students along with their own trauma, administrators trying to figure out how this could have even happened lead to the continual question of, how did this happen?

Families and teens that were part of the shooting really didn't seek out therapy until about a year later. When you first experienced trauma, your kind of in shock, you're numb. It took the students that long to realize there was something big happening and something was wrong. They couldn't articulate specifically what it was, but their parents and themselves knew something was wrong. I spoke with 4 students and some parents.

Jen

Can you talk about the first session with one of the students?

Dr Finneran

When someone is traumatized, a therapist needs to allow an ample amount of time for them to process the events that have taken place. We spend a lot of time talking about the events which have taken place; the things they saw, the things they felt, and anything they needed to process during and afterward. The trauma didn’t just happen that day. The impact also happened when the school was bombarded with law enforcement, reporters appeared looking for interviews, community services were quickly being set up just wanting to help. The crisis is over, but the trauma is still there. I feel they were able to initially get help during those times when the crisis occurred, but a year later, the trauma is still there without the readily available resources. When the students started to “un-numb” they started to ask for help.

Jen

Are you able to share some of the things the students shared during therapy? What they say? Heard?

Dr. Finneran

Many students heard the popping of the gun. They didn’t know what it was because they didn't understand what was going on. They heard the fire alarm, and it’s natural to think it is a test run. Because gun shots sound like fireworks, the community tried to be mindful during the 4th of July, or during New Years to reduce the number of fireworks going off to not trigger the survivors.

Many students were told to go into corners of the classrooms, in closets, under their desk, lights off, and shut and lock the door. They started texting, Googling, and reading, in the moment, what was happening; seeing the perpetrator has entered their school with a very large gun and has taken over the school. The school you are in right now. You know you are in danger. As a therapist, with professional training, even I can’t imagine what a student might have felt under a desk and realizing what the gun shots were, in real time. Remember this is a teenager, 16 – 17 years old, and that is what devasted the community and surrounding communities; the severity of the crime, the devastation, the emotional, the physical and the mental trauma it had.

Exiting out of the school was traumatizing for them as law enforcement officers tried to get them out as quickly as possible. Telling them, instructing them, “do not look down. Look straight ahead. Look straight ahead. Don't look down.” Because what was on the ground was obviously going to leave an imprint on their mind forever. There was a lot of blood, a lot of bodies and law enforcement really tried to instruct them to look ahead and walk fast. Even law enforcement that I've spoken to who were providing protection, have never seen this type of mass devastation and bloodshed while they've been in law enforcement.

Jen

It’s different when it’s kids.

Dr. Finneran

The teens were feeling things which were so overwhelming, and they didn’t understand where they were coming from. They can’t understand what they are feeling. I think it's a flood of feelings that come over you and it's hard to articulate for a teen who is trying to seek therapy. They are trying to learn how to cope with their PTSD and their trauma that they witnessed, and they've experienced during that time.

They couldn't sit in a classroom; they had a very hard time going back into the building of their school. That's how close it was. It was that traumatizing. The school had therapeutic dogs out there because it was so hard for them to reenter the school. They were trying to provide some sort of comfort. The services were put up really quickly and needfully to help the community and the parents and the students in the school and everyone who was involved.

Jen

How does a teenager deal with trauma versus an adult?

Dr. Finneran

Having them understand what they’ve been through. They would talk about it like they were reading a storybook; no emotion attached to it. What they were trying to recall was bizarre because it was so incredibly tragic. They spoke like they were on autopilot. Again, for teenagers, it’s hard for them to know something is wrong, they're feeling some sort of effects, but they can't really articulate why or how it's connected.

When they recall the events, it was awkward for me to hear it because what they were recalling was such trauma and devastation. They spoke like they were telling a story and they didn't understand how emotionally impactful these events had been and maybe that's why there's such severe anxiety, panic, PTSD and such nervousness. Allowing the teens to process the trauma how they need and for how long they need is important.

Jen

The additional training you got helped, but with some of your students, you took an out of the box approach to help them. Can you explain?

Dr. Finneran

I created a certain technique

Anytime they go into an anxiety provoking situation which really helped my students particularly when they are dealing with anxiety of being in the classroom. Pure 100% anxiety and they couldn’t calm themselves down. My cousin in Ohio made these smoothing rocks. I call them smoothing rocks because when you rub them, it is smooth, calming, and relaxing when you touch them. They had different positive affirmations on them, strength, courage, compassion, etc.

When a student would come in experiencing this anxiety, I would tell them to go to the bowl in my office and go thru them and pick the rock which feels good and soothing. They would take their time and go thru all the stones. I had them keep the stone. When they would go to school, they could rub this stone which was in their pockets to give them comfort and reassurance. This also had them use a sense which we typically dont, touch. The feedback was very helpful.

I learned that technique from watching my brother having separation anxiety from my mom and my mom giving him a paper clip to keep in his pocket to reassure him. I helped him tremendously.

Jen

Have you used that to help other clients?

Dr Finneran

I have. Anyone with trauma and anxiety, I utilize it as a healthy reminder that you are strong, you are beautiful. I use it especially on my teen and adolescent clients.

Jen

What impact has it had on you? I know you shared in the beginning that this was totally new, you had to get extra schooling to kind of learn how it how to deal with it, but can you tell us how it impacted you.

Dr. Finneran

Nothing like this ever happened to me on a professional or personal level. It really opened my eyes to how our society is changing in its psychological needs. With this Parkland shooting and with the shootings prior, what society is now dealing with vs what society was dealing with when I went to school 20 years ago, times change, people change, and society changes. As a therapist, you must keep up with those times and keep up with the events that take place in society, so you understand the impact on a psychological mental health level.

Jen

I read an article this morning which reported he is due to be charged this month. That's a long time, four years, for that cloud to be hanging over the community. How does this affect a community?

Dr. Finneran

So many people in the community are feeling so many different things There's not one answer which would be an accurate response to that question. I feel the community has a right to feel whatever they might be feeling.

Jen

When the students talk to you, what were their thoughts and feelings about the perpetrator?

Dr Finneran

They didn't know him personally. He was a prior student who graduated from the school and then came back and entered it. I don’t know if there was any familiarity between the students and the perpetrator.

Jen

I know we were going to talk about what it's like for a survivor to testify. Do you have thoughts on that?

Dr. Finneran

I would assume, seeing the perpetrator in a court setting, would create a flooding of emotions. When they chose to testify, I think, what a strong, brave, courageous thing to do. But also, there's no level of emotional preparedness which can happen. When you do testify, you're getting revictimized, and you're seeing the perpetrator in the courtroom, there's no level of preparedness that you can have emotionally until it happens.

Jen

I had to go to court to testify against our perpetrator. You feel like a victim repeatedly. It’s very hard because you must recall the details as much as you can because the goal is you want to put this perpetrator in jail for as long as you can so that they can't hurt anybody else.

What I would say to any of the survivors that have to testify is thank you, you are strong. They are going to need as much support as they can during this time. And even those who aren't testifying but are aware and hear the details of what's going on, it's going to trigger things and they need your support. They need your support just as much now, as they did then.

Is there anything else you would like to share with the audience? You have a book you can tell us about.

Dr Finneran

Yes, the book is called “Surviving Domestic Abuse, formal and informal supports and services.” The one piece of advice that I would tell parents is there's no book on how to be a good parent. There's not a guide on how to help navigate your teen through a mass school shooting. People right now, just need people.

People need people who are compassionate, and loving, whether it’s in formal support, with a law enforcement officer, whether it be a therapist, or an agency that deals directly with the crisis of the Parkland shooting, they just need people who have compassion and are supportive. Show the love and compassion non-judgmentally.

Encourage others to get help. For those students that I saw, I was just a big act of bravery coming to terms with, something's wrong and I think it's connected to this

Jen

It’s important to always be there for each other. They just want somebody to listen, they don't want you to fix it. They don't want you to try to dissect it or anything. They just want to be able to talk and talk and talk and talk and feel like that is welcome, and that they're not a burden when they talk.

Dr Finneran

Exactly. I think that is probably the biggest fear teens might have is they're going to be left feeling like they are a burden and fearful that their parents are going to worry about them. When parents are progressive, encourage them to speak up and speak out and talk to them, I think it is extremely helpful in making them feel they are not a burden. Let them know you are always an open ear willing to hear.

Jen

Being there for each other, and relying on professionals, such as yourself, is very important. I thank you for all you do.

Dr Finneran

You’re welcome. When you have a sensitive topic such as this, it’s making your audience aware that this is a sensitive topic. It may be triggering so if you feel like you're going to be triggered, then maybe wait until you're more emotionally ready to hear the episode.

Jen

Exactly. Yes, that's important. I would like to thank my special guest, Dr. Michelle Finneran. Your experience and more so your compassion creates an environment for survivors to feel safe in opening up. It takes a lot of courage to take that first step. As a survivor myself who believes in the healing process of therapy, I thank you for all you do. For many survivors talking about the incident is the first step to healing.

I would like to invite any survivor of a school shooting to reach out and share their story on I Need Blue if you feel sharing would help; the floor is yours when you are ready. I would like to thank the listeners, those new and those who continue to listen to the messages. If you feel inclined to support the message via sponsorships or advertisements within the episode visit www.INeedBlue.net for details. This is Jen Lee, survivor advocate, creator, and host of I Need Blue podcast. Remember you are stronger than you think.