

POWER OF PREVENTION SEASON 2, EPISODE 5

Choose Love: Teaching Young People Vital Skills for Getting Along in the World

Christin D'Ovidio:

Welcome to the Power of Prevention Podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening. In this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook tragedy, Scarlet Lewis, whose son was killed, founded. Choose love to teach children, educators, and families to respond with kindness, compassion, and respect to prevent future violence. In 2018, governor Sunu made choose Love a statewide initiative, and it was to be a proactive prevention action for our state. Shannon Desolate community wellness administrator has worked with hundreds of schools and families in Connecticut in the aftermath of the shooting. Today we can talk and have this interview to learn how she is spreading comfort and love among individuals and schools and communities, and to become future successful leaders and citizens. Shannon, I want to welcome you to the show today. We're really excited that you can join us and talk about this important work that you've been doing administering the Choose Love Movement here in New Hampshire. You provide post-trauma therapy in Connecticut. And so I just want to say to our listeners today, before we touch base on this conversation about the Sandy Hook tragedy to please take care of yourselves and step away from our conversation if you need to. Shannon, I really like to welcome you today.

Shannon Desilets:

Thank you so much. Happy to be here.

Christin D'Ovidio:

This is a passion project for you and Scarlet Lewis, and it was born out of unbearable pain in 2012 when a young man carried out a deadly shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. And I want to express how sorry we are that this happened to families in Connecticut and that it continues to happen across our country and we hope that no other families anywhere have to confront this situation again. So to start our conversation, I'd like if you could walk us through the origin of this Choose Love movement.

Shannon Desilets:

Sure. Thank you, Christin. So as you referred to already that this was born out of the Sandy Hook School tragedy and the founder of Choose Love, Scarlet Lewis lost her son, Jesse, that day in the tragedy. And how this came about is it actually started very soon after the tragedy. She returned home a few days later to gather clothes for his funeral. And on her way out the door, she was stopped in her tracks, she saw she had this chalkboard painted on the side of a cabinet in her kitchen, and she was stopped in her tracks because on that chalkboard, Jesse and his little 6-year-old phonetically spelled handwriting, had written the words nurturing, healing, love. And she knew right away I had the shooter been able to give and receive, nurturing, healing love. This wouldn't have happened, but she wanted to know more. So she invited a doctoral professor in his name is Dr. Chris Cook, he's now the author of The Compassionate Achiever. And she said to you, with your knowledge, what do these three words mean to you? What is Jesse trying to tell us here?

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Shannon Desilets:

And he researched those three words and found that those three words were across every culture's definition of compassion. So Jesse really truly laid the groundwork for the Choose Love movement. What happened next is Scarlet brought in educators and counselors and psychologists, and they taught her about character, social, emotional development and the Choose Love curriculum was created. It's broken down based off of his chalkboard message into the choose of formula, being courage plus gratitude plus forgiveness, plus compassion action. And the lessons within the curriculum are built off of that formula. And going back to Jesse's three words, nurturing, healing, love. Nurturing means loving, kindness, gratitude, healing means forgiveness, it helps bring us, and also resilience and love is compassion action.

So that's truly the groundwork of how this all started. I, as you spoke earlier, I've been providing post-trauma therapy down in Newtown, Sandy Hook for now, I can't believe I'm saying 12 years, but I started going just a few weeks after the tragedy and Scarlet would lay on my therapy table and share with me about her vision for her organization. And then when it came to fruition, first and foremost, the most important hat for me that Oliver wear is I'm a mom. And this started here in New Hampshire with me simply wanting to bring this to my son's school. I've now seen the other side through my work down in Newtown, Sandy Hook, every tear that I've wiped, every story that I know that I can't share, I've seen what this community has endured. And that fuels me here to bring this throughout New Hampshire, to do everything in my power to try to prevent another community going through this. So back in 2018, that is when Governor Sun, who hired me, we became the first state in the nation to make this a statewide initiative. And I had the honor of working directly out of his office for five years and doing something no other state has done before. I've now found home in our Department of Health and Human Services division for behavioral health, where I have the honor of working with such incredible people doing great work throughout our state.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Can you talk more about these skills that are taught from Choose Love and how do they prevent violence or other risk behavior or how does that impact behavior?

Shannon Desilets:

Yeah, I appreciate this question and also likening it to what people have endured post covid, right? Because it's very difficult time and choose Love teaches us self-awareness skills, self-management skills, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and how to handle conflict, how to face our pain instead of resisting, avoiding or numbing how to overcome adversity. And there are lessons in neuroscience when we see this with the children too, especially when we understand how our magnificent brain works, right? You start to see and why certain behaviors might occur. You start to see shifts in that. We have mindful pets techniques and positive psychology, growth mindset, and also this concept of post-traumatic growth and it teaches. So choose love overall, how this is preventative. It teaches essential life skills across our lifespan, bringing in lessons according to everything I just spoke about. And these skills and tools help us thrive.

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Shannon Desilets:

And when you look at violence, let's think about the pathway to violence. It starts with a grievance and that moves up into an attack. The attack end of the pathway is where hardening of schools comes in. Very important, of course. What if we are looking at the pathway and say, let's be proactive and preventative, and let's try to prevent grievances from happening in the first place by providing these skills and tools to do so. Or if one does happen, if a grievance does occur, what if we teach skills and tools to work through conflict in a healthy way? What if we provided opportunity to calm the nervous system so that we aren't reactionary, we aren't in fight or flight, but rather to access our prefrontal cortex of the brain where logic and reasoning reside so we can feel safe, grounded, ready to learn? And that's where Choose Love comes in as proactive prevention.

This was a big part of our school Safety Preparedness Task Force report, which came out in July of 2018. Six months after our report came out, the Federal Commission report came out echoing what was stated in New Hampshire's report with the first chapter, talking about the need for social emotional learning and also actually mentions Choose Love. And when you look at the root cause, a lot of issues facing society today, people of all ages, be it anxiety, depression, substance misuse, bullying to name a few, often the root cause comes down to lack of connection and or essential life skills. And here's the thing, no matter our ages, no matter our background, we're all the same in the need to love, be loved, have authentic connections. And with this topic of violence, Scarlet has, I think, kind of shocked some people a little bit. She's actually spoken and done podcasts with school shooters or would've been school shooters because we must learn from them the why.

So she's wanted to dig in deeper. And in one podcast she actually shared with a gentleman who, he had a list, he had a weapon, he had a plan, and that plan was set. What changed it for him was another student asking him to watch a movie and having that connection. Us as humans, we want to feel safe and seen. It's very basic and choose love. Here in New Hampshire, we've also expanded this beyond just public schools. So I work a lot. What's following academy in Northfield, they've actually become the first certified Choose Love School in the nation. And one student there, just as an example, she shared with me, she said, choose Love has saved my life. She said, if it weren't for Choose Love, I would've ended up in jail. She learned another path. I think of that student often, and I've also brought this into prisons. Our Choose Love for Corrections program is very successful. And across the board, men and women who are incarcerated say the same thing. Had I had this growing up, my life would've taken another path. I didn't know these skills and tools.

Christin D'Ovidio:

When a school brings in the Choose Love program, I assume it's for the young people in the school system, the school personnel and administration, and then is there also a community component or a parental component and caregiver component too?

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Shannon Desilets:

So we have actually online at choose love movement org. People can go on and access, anybody can access, it's no cost. You register and there's actually prenatal infant toddler through grade 12. So all grade levels, all the lessons are done, all the slides are created, everything's done for people. And we have a home program, community program, and then also one designed for athletes and coaches as well. And then through my position here in the state, we've created two separate caregivers, which is designed for foster caregivers, kinship programs, workers in the field, and also as I mentioned, choose up for corrections, which is in both our men's and women's facilities as well as transitional housing units. Other states have also reached out. I've met probably with five states in the last two weeks, wanting to bring into their correctional settings as well. So the caregiver and corrections program, people would reach out to me directly on that. I am working with Choose Love that nationally as well, but the home program, community program, pre-K through grade 12, athletes and coaches, all of that is right there for you on the website.

Christin D' Ovidio:

Well, I have two questions from this. So the outreach is the initiation piece, but what is a good approach for schools or communities or institutions of any type to successfully get buy-in and introduce this as a concept? Because you need everybody on board. It can't just be another, here's our program we're doing now to fix the problem, and I assume it's not one and done, right? There's a process here. Can you talk about that?

Shannon Desilets:

Yeah, there's a process now. I so appreciate this conversation because I just had this conversation with a school actually, because obviously you want to set this up for success and in the end, this is to help students and also staff wellbeing, right? Their jobs do become easier through this. When you start to see behaviors improve and academics improve, best case scenario is when it is schoolwide. I work with an elementary school here in New Hampshire where they even created like a buddy system where even office staff, cafeteria, janitorial stuff, they will buddy up and go into classrooms while they're doing choose up lessons. That way everybody is part of this conversation. Everybody can then relate to the Choose Up formula and how that can be woven in elsewhere. As I said, every school has their own needs and situations like this be. They might not have the opportunity to do that, but let's sit down together and create a situation that will be the best for delivery for you to positively impact students and staff.

Christin D' Ovidio:

What's the duration and expectation of the program and does it ever go away? Should it be, I mean, in my head it should be every year there's a cohort of youth moving. Even if one school has the capacity the school's feeding into, it might not. And so how does it integrate?

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Shannon Desilets:

Definitely better earlier, and all the research shows significant impact bringing this into students in the earlier ages. With that said, look at the success that's even happening in the prison, so it's never too late to reach somebody. There are lessons for every grade level, so ideally as schools or district are adopting this and every grade level is going through their lessons, the curriculum writers that have gone into this, and this program was significantly updated at the beginning of last school year. So those that might have taken a look at Choose Love when I first started in 2018 and printed out PD versions and put 'em in binders like people like to do. Sometimes it's such a more enhanced curriculum now. I think sometimes people felt some was a little repetitive, perhaps a little young for some of the older grades. Those have been completely redone. They are so enriched and it is designed to carry this through. Wouldn't it be amazing to provide this for students every year that they're in school to help build these skills and tools? I sure wish I had it. I wish I had had this to share with my son when he was growing up.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We all know it's a huge issue when people are overwhelmed and like you said, they go to fight or flight because they don't know how to manage what's happening, and it plays into so many other risk behaviors. It's impulse behavior around everything, just emotionally reacting to things.

Shannon Desilets:

What brought me down to Newtown Sandy Hook is a therapy called MN I, which is a mouthful. It's Masco Tova Neurosensory Motor Reflux Integration, and this gets to our primary reflexes of our body. When we undergo stress or trauma, our reflexes come into serve us. That's how they're designed to protect us. Sometimes they can remain stuck or heightened, and that is when you start to see various symptoms, whether it be that fight or flight, whether it be not able to concentrate, whether it be with a student, just constantly in survival mode. And then when we sit them down in a classroom chair and we expect them to take information in through their court deck and learn, we need to allow students and adults to have a calm nervous system so that they can better learn and have those reasoning and logic skills and have emotional regulation, and they're not operating out of their fear center.

I think about all the things we're asking and needing in schools because it's this place where children spend most of their time and are interacting with people that they have. They're so far outside of their core family circle. It just seems so important, but yet so hard to put everything in there in these constrained times. There's something to be said for connection, and I probably said this earlier, no matter our ages, no matter our backgrounds, we're all the same in the need to love, be loved and have authentic connection, and what if we simply showed up for one another in that authentic way and providing those connections. There's such great programs throughout our state to help support this as well. I'm very good friends with Dr. Brooklyn Rainey of One Trusted adult, and she talks about these healthy connections. There's just so much to be said about fostering those connections and helping somebody feel safe and seen.

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Christin D'Ovidio:

When we were meeting to plan this interview, you talked about these remarkable recovery stories that you witnessed these people's personal stories, and we hear so much about PTSD or post-traumatic Stress Disorder. We don't really hear a lot about post-traumatic growth, so can you explain to us what post-traumatic growth is and then maybe share some examples of what this looks like?

Shannon Desilets:

Absolutely. Yeah. It's fascinating, right? We all know what PTS or PTSD is, but if you look up post-traumatic growth, there's actually a lot of research on this, so post-traumatic growth means rowing through trauma, and if you look at Scarlet, right, she's the poster child of the ptg. She has lived through the unimaginable and done in such a way to not only foster her own healing, but truly helping people across the globe choose. Love has now been accessed in all 50 states in over 120 countries, but PTG post-traumatic growth means that positive psychological changes can occur following traumatic experience where there's a shift in perception of our lives, how we view our life perhaps, and our relationships with others, which lead to a deeper appreciation for life, a stronger sense of personal strength, and essentially growing through that trauma. And I'm sure many of us, for those listening, have experienced some level of PTG at one point, not to the magnitude that Scarlet has, but at some point in our lives, even possibly currently now, people might be filling this. Now, for me personally, I had a major PTG chapter in my life where about 11 years ago, I myself laid in conquered hospital bed for about 19 days, and I almost didn't make it out.

My body was failing. I had stomach paralysis. It was scary. As a mom, very scary. Am I going to come out of this? What's going to happen to my son? And I look back on that chapter, and as scary as it was, I can now say that I am grateful for that time because that chapter, when I did move through that, that removed a veil over my eyes that I didn't even know existed. It gave me clarity on what matters in life and what doesn't and what's essential to spend our time on and be present with and what isn't. It gave me an even stronger knowing of how important it's to be truly present with myself and my loved ones. My gratitude for little things really grew into the big things. Having gratitude for those little things just really grew in big ways and my appreciation for life and wanting to help others, it gave me clarity and changed my path forward.

It was after that it led me to be becoming also a certified holistic health coach, for instance, but that was the catalyst, right? That trauma changed my path forward and brought me here today doing what I'm doing for the state. So I am grateful for that. And also when you talk about PTG, I can give examples, again, referring back to individuals within our Department of Corrections. For instance, I have yet to be present for graduation without tears in my eyes. Hearing the impact, hearing how this has changed, how they show up in life now with themselves, with others, with their families, how they're able to practice that pause versus stimulus and our response, but that pause versus reactionary responses, it is during challenging times that we have the opportunity to grow, right? It's not when we're happy go lucky at our birthday party, right? Those are great. Let's celebrate life. But it is during challenging times where that affords us the opportunity to grow and learn coming out of it.

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Christin D'Ovidio:

Think you might've almost just answered the last question that I wanted to ask you, which was, what's the most important message you want our listeners to take away about keeping our children and communities safe and resilient?

Shannon Desilets:

I think summing it up, we're all in this together, and we must address the root cause. Oftentimes, so much is spent on reactions to things that are happening. What if we address that root cause? Let's be proactive. Let's be preventative. And again, going back what I just said, being authentic and sharing our stories. There's so much power and human to human connection and sharing our stories and fostering those connections, and we're all in this together. We must address the root cause. Let's be proactive. Let's foster connections from where I come from. Know that our Department of Health and Human Services is here to support the wellbeing of all ages, and I'm happy to be a part of it, and I encourage people to reach out to me.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Well, I would like to thank you so much for speaking with me today and sharing all this information. I learned a lot.

Thank you. To our listeners, for your interest in this podcast, please check out the resources in the show notes to learn more about Choose Love. Also, if you haven't already, [sign up for notifications @drugfreenh.org](https://www.drugfreenh.org). We will let you know when we drop a new interview or other resource. It is your place for all things prevention in New Hampshire.