



Chapter 1

MEET THE AUTHORS

1.1. Meet Tom Thelen



Hey Everybody, Tom Thelen here. If I could go back in time to talk with my younger self (“Teen Tom,” if you will), I would hand myself the book you’re about to read, and say:

“Greetings Teen Tom. It is I, Future Tom, from the future. I’m here to tell you to **hang in there. You’re gonna make it.** Now, take this book and devour every page. Don’t literally eat the book. But seriously, read it! This book will help you. It will change your life. You’ll realize you’ve always been “good-enough.” You’ll stop trying so hard to be the funny guy. You’ll have better relationships, even romance, and you’ll be physically and mentally healthy. With this book, you have a choice. You can take it lightly and learn the skills over the next twenty-plus years, like I did, or you can take it seriously and get a huge head start on life. As your future self, I’d recommend the latter. I can’t tell you more details about your future life, or I’ll mess up the whole space-time-continuum, so just read the book. Also, stop parting your hair in the middle. Trust me on that one. Farewell, and I’ll see you in the future!”

That is essentially what I’m trying to say to you, the reader. But it’s even better than that. I’ve enlisted three other experts to help with the book: **Dr. Kirleen Neely**, **Dr. Kimberley Orsten Hooge (aka: Dr. OH)**, and **Dr. Elliott Kagan**. These people are my personal friends, and they’re also some of the top mental health experts in the world. But please don’t misunderstand. Even though we’re great friends, it doesn’t mean we agree on everything. We have very diverse views on politics and religion (two topics we will not be addressing in this book). We have different backgrounds and upbringings. We live in different parts of the United States. We don’t look alike or sound alike, but we all have one clear mission with this book: we’re going to give you absolutely everything we have... every

insight, every piece of advice, and every skill we wish we had back when we were your age.

We're calling it **Mental Health 101** for a reason. **"101"** is more of a college term, but it sums up the idea. At colleges and universities, the courses are often numbered by the year and the sequence of the course. English 101, for example, is for freshmen (year one), and it's the first class in English. Courses labeled "101" are more of an introduction to a big topic. They give you a basic overview, teach you the core skills, and most importantly, they give you a chance to practice it and even stumble your way through it. As with most things in life, you have to walk before you run.

As a teen, I could have really used a book like *Mental Health 101*. I was the short kid with asthma and allergies. I didn't know why I was being bullied at school or why I was mad at my dad. Back, I didn't realize I was struggling with anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, so I never asked for help. Then one day, help came to me.

It didn't seem like help at first. It seemed like getting in trouble. I had missed one too many assignments at school, so the principal called a meeting with all my teachers, my parents, and me. We sat down around a big table and each teacher said basically the same thing, **"Tom is a good student at heart, but he gets distracted with all his joking and sarcasm. He has a lot of potential, but he struggles with responsibility, and he misses a lot of homework."** I didn't know what to say. At the end of that meeting I was put on academic probation. This was my last chance. One more mistake and I'd be kicked out of school.

After the meeting, my English teacher, Mrs. Burdick, asked to talk with me and my parents. She said she saw great potential in me and enjoyed having me in class. (This came as a surprise because she was my strictest teacher and toughest grader.) Then she started talking about the idea of wearing masks. She said we sometimes wear masks to cover up our hurts. It started to become clear she was not talking about Halloween. She spoke softly and patiently, "Tom, underneath that class clown mask, I see a very hurting student... a student who needs help." How could she see through me like that? I didn't need help, I thought... I needed to get out of there! But something kept me from running out of the room. Before I knew it, I was agreeing to get counseling for my mental health. In that moment, I felt a sense of shame and defeat. And at the exact same time... I felt hope.

Mrs. Burdick quickly became my trusted adult – the person I could talk to without feeling judged. She helped me get into counseling, and over the course of time, it dramatically changed my life. Outside of family, Mrs. Burdick played the biggest role in my teenage years. Even after high school, college, marriage, and starting a

family, she and her husband Jeff have always been there for me, my wife Casie, and our four kids.

In the summer of 2017, Mrs. Burdick passed away after a long battle with cancer, and it was devastating to everyone who knew her. At her memorial service I got to speak about the impact she made in my life. As I looked out at the crowd, I saw faces of all ages, even former classmates who were now adults like me, and I realized in that moment... each of them had their own story to tell. Mrs. Burdick's impact on our lives never faded away or faded out. In fact, for most of us, it only grew stronger over time. I still take Mrs. Burdick's influence with me whenever I travel to speak at schools and conferences. I share her wisdom in all of my speeches. I'm forever grateful for her investment in my life, and she will always be part of my story. That's the power of a mentor.

1.1 – Discussion Questions

1. As a teen, what are some of the struggles or challenges you're facing?
2. Who is your trusted adult? Who would you talk to if you were going through a crisis or if you needed advice? Write the name of at least one trusted adult in the space below. It could be a parent, guardian, teacher, counselor, or someone in your community.
3. **Challenge:** If you don't have a trusted adult in your life (someone you can be completely honest with) then I'm challenging you to make a commitment to find one. If you don't know where to start, you can always talk to a teacher or a school counselor.

More About Tom Thelen

Tom Thelen is the founder of Reset Schools, a nonprofit that partners with K-12 schools to teach mental health skills and resiliency. Since 2012, Tom has spoken at over 800 schools and has been interviewed on NBC, CBS, and FOX. He is the creator of NoBullyingSchools.com, an evidence-based bullying curriculum with a smartphone app and video lessons on bullying, social skills, and student leadership. Tom is also a Certified Trainer in Youth Mental Health First Aid, a program by the U.S. Department of Behavioral Health. In 2005, Tom graduated from Grace Christian University with a bachelor's of science degree and went on to write three books for students including *Victimproof*, *Teen Leadership Revolution*, and the upcoming 2020 release: *Mental Health 101*. He and his wife, Casie, have four children and live in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Learn more about Tom's live events and virtual assemblies at <https://TomThelen.com>.



1.2 – Meet Dr. Kirleen



What's Up Everybody! My name is Dr. Kirleen Neely, and I'm very excited to connect with you through Mental Health 101 because I truly believe this book could change your life! I know that may sound a little dramatic, but I say this because a book like this would have made an enormous difference to me as a teen, and here's why.

I grew up in a home where I knew I was loved tremendously, but many of the actions, words, and events that occurred left me feeling unworthy. You know that "not good enough" feeling. Looking back, I realize my family was going through a massive transition, and the stress showed up in short fuses and lots of yelling. Moving from our native country of Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean to a small town in Texas was a very stressful time, to say the least. Although that was many years ago, I still remember the painful racial slurs and anti-immigrant words hurled at me and my family.

At school, I was being bullied for having an accent and just for being different. I was a very skinny kid, which led to jokes about my physical appearance. All of these events set me up to have some pretty bad self-esteem issues as a teen. I learned to bottle up my feelings and pretend that I was okay (even when I wasn't). I didn't want anyone to know I was hurting because I thought it was a sign of weakness. Thankfully, I learned that speaking up is one of the bravest things you can do. This book will help you realize that it's okay to ask for help.

By ninth grade, I was honestly flirting with thoughts of how much better it would be if I just didn't wake up in the morning. I didn't have a book like Mental Health 101 to help me understand my feelings, but I did have sports (track and basketball) and academics. I poured myself into the things that made me feel strong, confident, and worthy, and it changed the way I saw myself. As my confidence grew, I knew in the future I wanted to help other teens deal with their challenges. I stuck to my plan, and eventually it became my career. Today I work as a mental health therapist, and I've been able to help thousands of people. I hope as we connect through these pages you will read something that reminds you of your worth and value and inspires you to allow your story to be a light for others.

1.2 – Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Kirleen mentioned she needed a book like Mental Health 101 when she was a teen. How do you feel about exploring a book about your mental health?
2. What is one specific thing you hope to get from reading this book? It could be that you want to address something in your life, that you want more of something, or less of something. What do you want to get out of it?
3. It's always a good idea to have a positive mindset, especially when discussing new or uncomfortable topics. Write down at least one positive mindset goal you hope to keep while reading the book. For example, you could commit to being open-minded or to fully participating in the process.

More About Dr. Kirleen

Dr. Kirleen Neely holds a PhD in Counselor Education from St. Mary's University. She is a licensed Professional Counselor and an approved Counselor Supervisor. Dr. Kirleen has worked in the mental health field for over twenty years and has been the chief executive officer of Neely Counseling Center since 2001. She currently manages the day-to-day operations of her counseling center and serves as an adjunct professor for St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Dr. Kirleen spends a large portion of her time writing, teaching, and speaking to audiences of all ages on issues related to self-esteem and anxiety. She is supported by her husband and two beautiful daughters. You can listen to episodes of Dr. Kirleen's weekly podcast and learn more about the Neely Counseling Center at <https://NeelyCounseling.com>.



1.3 – Meet Dr. OH



Hi y'all! I'm Dr. Kimberley Orsten Hooge, but you can call me **Dr. OH**. When I was in high school, they introduced a Psychology course to the list of electives we could take. I remember being halfway through the course and thinking to myself, "Why didn't we get this information sooner? It sure would've made life easier to know these things about myself!"

Let me rewind a little...I was born in Texas but spent the first 8 years of my life in Trinidad, where my Dad was working at the time. Trinidad is a small island off the coast of South America. At age 3, my Mom put me in kindergarten, which

meant I was **two years younger** than everyone else in my grade. At age 8, we moved to Houston, Texas, and at age 9, I entered middle school. It was a rough time for me because I was so different and so unfamiliar with American culture. Everyone at school already had friends they made growing up, so breaking into those social circles was a slow and sometimes painful process, especially since I was so much younger. I spent a lot of time alone, even when I was at school. Social situations started making me nervous, I became very self-conscious and very self-critical. By the time I started high school at age 12, I had already developed depression, anxiety, and a seriously negative body image. The pressure for academic excellence was a strain, and the need for social acceptance was constant. I turned to drugs and sometimes even self-mutilation because those experiences seemed to give me a momentary break from **my truth** (meaning, the reality I was living in).

Today, I can look back and realize there was nothing “wrong” with my truth. Being younger than everyone else is **hard**. Excruciatingly hard! But no one ever bothered to tell me *why* it was so hard...until that Psychology course. That class taught me how my brain was changing and how important it was to take care of myself physically *and* mentally. I learned about social dynamics. I learned about anxiety and depression and why they happen. I discovered how to cope with my stress and anxiety, and most importantly, where to go for help. *I learned that my truth was okay*. If nothing else, I want this book to help you learn that, too. Even if parts of your story seem broken right now, YOU are not broken, and in this book we’re going to tell you why.

1.3 – Discussion Questions

1. Take a minute to think about this question. What parts of your life are confusing or frustrating to you right now?
2. In the space below, write down at least one question you have about your life, your brain, or your mental health.
3. What do you want to get out of this book? When you’re done with this book, do you want anything to be different in your life? If so, what do you want to be different? Add your goals below.
4. Make a recurring calendar event in your phone. Set a monthly reminder to CHECK BOOK QUESTIONS & GOALS. Come back to this page once a month to check on your progress. Remember: you can always add more questions and more goals along the way.

More About Dr. OH

Dr. Kimberley Orsten Hooge, aka Dr. OH, received her PhD in Psychology, specializing in Cognitive Neuroscience, from Rice University. She loves research, teaching, and all things brain-related, and works as an independent research consultant. She has co-authored numerous publications on topics such as pediatric brain injury, resilience in at-risk youth, and visual perception. She is an adjunct lecturer for The University of Texas at Dallas, and is passionate about educating others about how the brain works. Dr. OH lives in Houston, Texas, with her IT ninja husband, rambunctious toddler daughter, dog Henry, and cats Gandalf and Koxka. Learn more about her research at <https://KimDoesResearch.com>.



1.4 – Meet Dr. Kagan



Hello everyone! I'm Dr. Elliott Kagan, and I'm so excited for what you're about to learn through this book. It's been a long time since I was a teen, and looking back I realize how difficult and important those times were for me. Honestly, I had no idea what I was going through emotionally and how it would impact my life later on as an adult. I grew up in a small suburban town in New Jersey, just outside of metropolitan New York City. I struggled with a lack of confidence and felt alone with my feelings. We didn't talk about feelings in my family, and it wasn't part of the curriculum at school. If you experienced anxiety or depression or negative feelings as a child, the emphasis was on burying or ignoring those emotions, as if expressing emotion was a sign of weakness. So, I did a lot of burying those negative emotions, and I paid a price for that. My emotional distress turned into physical ailments, which can happen, and I was taken to multiple doctors over years to find out what was wrong with me. Finally, my family and I were told that my physical problems were emotionally based, and that I suffered with anxiety and nervousness. That was my first step toward getting help, and over the course of time it made a wonderful difference in my life.

Today, I'm a psychologist helping children and adults recognize their emotions and discover their amazing self-worth. I smile now when I think of the connection between my young life and what I do professionally. Naturally, I want to help young people overcome and master what I had to overcome and master. Of course, everyone's journey is different, and I know it's never easy. At the same time, I hope this book makes it a little easier for you. Mental health is so

important, and it needs to be emphasized and talked about. We need to take care of our mental wellness, especially as we go through today's difficult challenges. As we write this book, we are amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is affecting everyone (even us adults). I hope this book provides you with hope, validation, and real-life skills for your life journey.

1.4 – Discussion Questions

1. When Dr. Kagan talked about your **amazing self-worth**, what do you think he meant by that?
2. How did Dr. Kagan's struggles as a child and teen end up propelling him forward in life?
3. **“At the end of the day people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel.”** This is a quote by the incredible Maya Angelou, a poet and civil rights activist. What does the quote mean to you? Why do you think feelings matter so much?

More About Dr. Kagan

Dr. Elliot Kagan earned his PhD from the Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology at Yeshiva University in New York. As a School Psychologist and a New York State Licensed Psychologist, He specializes in clinical treatment and school-based services. Dr. Kagan worked for many years at Suffern Middle School in New York, where he served as a school psychologist and coordinator for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. Since retiring from the school system, he has continued his private practice in counseling and has worked as an independent consultant in the education industry. Dr. Kagan is passionate about finding solutions that support kids, teens, families, educators, and entire school systems.