

How confronting trauma made the People's Prince

• Kerry Howard



Prince Harry speaks at the Vax Live concert at SoFi stadium earlier this month. Picture: Getty Images

When Prince Harry talks about the impact of trauma on his life, he provides a voice to the millions of human beings who have had their mental health affected by negative experiences, usually out of their control.

Most recent reports about the Duke and Duchess of Sussex have been focused on events and interactions with the royal family: their tell-all with Oprah and Harry's interview with podcaster Dax Shepard both drew support and ire in almost equal measure. Now, in the Oprah- and Harry-produced Apple TV+ series, *The Me You Can't See*, Harry reveals how he found royal duties so emotionally exhausting in his late 20s and early 30s that the anxiety he felt escalated to panic attacks, and in that same period he had suicidal thoughts. Unsurprisingly, he also [admitted to self-medicating with alcohol and drugs](#) to mask his feelings of anger and grief.

He has openly discussed the fact that the decision he and Meghan made to move to the US from Britain was to get away from the tabloid UK media. He openly expresses significant disdain for it - perfectly logical given his mother died in an accident while trying to escape their unrelenting lens. To him, this type of dramatising tabloid media represents the system that killed his mother.

In my years of experience with trauma, I've learnt that survival is miraculous but recovery from trauma can be a choice. Both William and Harry tragically lost their mother, and both were traumatised. But while William, in direct line to the throne, had a greater sense of purpose bestowed upon him, Harry was left to his own devices and, as he entered into adulthood, spent much of his time warding off perceptions of "bad boy" behaviour.

He eventually found his sense of purpose when the world started to notice that he had a lot of the qualities that his mother displayed - empathy and compassion. Rather than just being a playboy prince, he started to step into his mother's legacy to make the world a better place.

In marrying Meghan and stepping away from his family, he demonstrated a strength of character that hasn't been seen since King Edward abdicated for Mrs Simpson. Certainly, he is a much stronger man than his father.

In supporting his wife and family, speaking openly about their challenges and calling for things to change, he also gives his mother a voice. Anyone who watched the television series *The Crown* may have some insight into the pain that Princess Diana experienced as a fringe-dweller in the royal family. Eating disorders often develop from traumatic experiences.

The Duke and Duchess highlight an opportunity to change the future of the monarchy. They are calling for the institution to step out from the dark ages and be inclusive, or risk being lost to the ether of irrelevance.

They have spoken openly about their difficulties and shared how they have tried to overcome them...that is what makes them inspirational. When Prince Harry says "vulnerability is strength", he demonstrates that he understands that when people with his level of influence speak openly about their challenges as a human being, it provides a unique opportunity to normalise these experiences for the common man and woman.

Just as Diana became "the People's Princess" when she broke royal protocol by hugging and shaking hands with AIDS patients, the House of Sussex have shown themselves to be human - with feelings, emotions and expectations. But while they have many supporters, public opinion is still divided.

They talk about their traumatic experiences and explain why they were wounded by them. All humans experience trauma. The word is Greek in origin, and it literally means wound. Human beings are wounded regularly - some worse than others, but still wounded.

Prince Harry has highlighted that he and Meghan's experiences have had a negative impact on them, and he has exiled himself and braved significant ridicule and derision in speaking out. Yet in doing so he has corralled the world's attention on an issue that impacts all of us - offering us all an opportunity to focus on treating trauma differently.

Kerry Howard is a psychologist and author of *The Trouble With Trauma*.

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