

Open the Can of Worms

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By Tracey Farrell, a mental health social worker and passionate advocate for overcoming childhood trauma and adversity, this poem was written after speaking to many survivors about their experiences of the mental health sector, and practitioners who described asking about trauma histories as ‘opening a can of worms’.

<p>I heard you talking as I was walking by your open door Telling each other to stick to the presenting issue, Don't go opening a can of worms, keep to our core Let's do this on our terms. Yet you don't realize that this can of worms That you don't want to open Stays stuck inside of me wriggling and squirming, gnawing and chewing Eating away at my insides with each toxic bite, until I learn to fight and show my might through snide words and worse. Or worse still, 'till I have no fight left, no will to live, no reason at all And I wonder do you remember my name? That I told you my dad died by suicide when I was five? Do you smile when you see me, or roll your eyes? That dread you feel as you answer your phone and the receptionist says in that tone, the one reserved by people like her for people like me, "It's her...again" "Give me ten", you sigh and then wonder why I scream at her and hang up, not just the phone but this time my never to return sign. So my appointment arrives and I don't arrive, and you note with rising glee a DNA or an FTA on that file of my life. I wonder what might happen if instead of that being attributed to me, it was attributed to you. What would you do?</p>	<p>(cont' p2)</p> <p>If that failure to attend meant You failed to attend to trauma-informed practices that might have made the difference Or if I didn't have to pretend that I care about your therapy With their cute little acronyms ACT, CBT, and DBT All the letters except M and E Me.</p> <p>I want you to see me...work well with me, and open that can of worms Not to watch you squirm but to help me see That I am not rotten, That my 'mental illness' and my addictions Are just a symptom of trauma not forgotten. My body, it remembers Even when my mind can't join the dots From A to B and to C See? It's your way, or the highway With your policies full of risk adversity That trump the ones about trauma and make me jump through hoops made of government red tape. Believe me I know it's not just you, it's the whole system I don't expect Blue tights and a cape You don't have to save me But it would help if you'd see me through a lens of understanding and take time to develop Relationship Built on trust so that when you do what you must The scales might tip Towards me being supported and vindicated And you could ask and respond,</p>
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(cont' p3)

rather than tell and react
So that I can learn to ask
for what I need and respond
with my truth rather than
tell you what I think you want to hear
and to stop me reacting from my Trauma,
so far out my Window of Tolerance.
Zero tolerance
Isn't just a poster on a wall
Warning me that you require safety
It's how you and I feel both about
My sadness and pain,
no tolerance at all
So it masquerades as rage
And fills the page you write about me
Confirming my non-compliance
With the treatment that you do to me.
I'm trapped in your paragraph prison
There's precision in the way you wield that pen
Severing the human parts of me
Without me ever having made a decision
About how it would be
How I wish I could be openly defiant
To ask for what I need -
Just open the can of worms!
Barriers exist that you can't even see
They stand rock solid before me
Telling me that no one cares
So when you run late it just confirms
That the worm of self-hate
Crawling through my mind
That it is all on your terms.
Those terms are clear
You can see my fate,
Mood states turned to personality traits
The doctor has ordered
My mind disordered
Borderline, Antisocial....
ain't so far from the truth
If we're talking about the mess
That is my social engagement system
shot to pieces by toxic stress.
Where rules about my body got broken
By people who said rules shouldn't get broken
At least not by me
And here I am breaking rules again
Speaking the unspoken,
Asking you to see
That the one tool you need
Is this - Open the can of worms!