

“My abusive past has been a gift”

She was abused as a child, and in turn, she inflicted it on her daughter. Life coach Elisabetta Franzoso dares to reveal all, reflecting her courage, candour and can-do spirit

She's struggled with the abuse she suffered as a child, but when you meet Elisabetta Franzoso, 46, all you see is a charismatic woman brimming with positive energy. You can hardly imagine her pulling her toddler's hair or twisting her limbs in a fit of rage. This was just one of the signs of anger Elisabetta displayed as a result of the painful suffering she had endured for most of her life.

It's taken this Italian, who's been in Singapore since 1995, over 120 hours of painful, soul-searching work with therapists and counsellors, to get to where she is now.

Having turned her painful past into a story of triumph, Elisabetta is now a life coach and motivator and seeks to help others find their own joy and self-belief. And one of the ways she is doing that is with the release of her part-autobiographical, part self-help book, entitled *Stella's Mum Gets Her Groove Back*. In it, Elisabetta reveals the abuse she suffered at the hands of her parents, maternal grandfather and other authority figures in her life.

She shares, “My mother's abuse was physical, emotional and verbal. My father's abuse was covert – he failed to provide me with the protection I needed from a father, and he did not have the capacity to confront my mother when she hurt me.”

On her maternal grandfather, Elisabetta says, “I remember the terror I felt every time I was in his presence. He never hit me, but he beat my stepmother and grandmother in front of my eyes.”

The trail of abuse continued as she grew older. When she was 8-years-old, Elisabetta was sexually violated, first by her piano teacher for three years, and then her high-school English teacher who used to grab her breasts.

Elisabetta adds, “I kept on attracting men who would abuse me emotionally and, at 23, I was assaulted by one of my university lecturers.”

Out Of Control

The years of abuse took their toll on Elisabetta. “A lot of anger for the abuse and neglect was stored in my body and it started to be expressed through outbursts of rage when I was a teenager. I felt that my life was spiralling out of control. I finally consulted a psychiatrist at 20 and was told I needed to leave the toxic environment of my family if I was to save myself.”

Elisabetta says that her lack of self-esteem made her unable to assert herself and she found herself compulsively seeking for approval, with the unconscious goal of “buying love” – the love, she says, she never received as a child. She says, “I could not vocalise my needs and wants at all. I was just building layers of anger against myself, but the anger was expressed towards those who were often the wrong targets – my husband and daughter.

“I started abusing Stella when she was one. I insulted her, called her names, twisted her arms and hands, pulled her beautiful hair... She told me that



Elisabetta with her parents.



Elisabetta with daughter Stella and her husband Leonardo Talpo.

has provided me.”

From there, her relationships with those around her were also transformed. “I realised I was accountable for the results in my life – that's when I decided to get real and to stop hiding in shame.” After a year, I stopped beating Stella, who's now 16 and studying in Boston on a performing arts scholarship. I gained a beautiful, honest relationship with her.”

Resolution

So honest that Stella, at 13, wrote a poem titled “Bitch” about her mum, which Elisabetta shares in the book. “I felt pain at first when I read it, then I felt joy. If my daughter could write that, it was because she could feel the freedom to be honest, without fear that I would withdraw my love from her. I've also taught her to coach herself and express her feelings whether they are positive or negative; vocalising anger in a non-aggressive way is healthy and empowering.”

And with her transformation came the desire to help others. “In the first year of counselling, I discovered that I had a possible gift for helping others. My counsellor pointed this out to me and motivated me to explore that area although, at that point, with my low self-esteem, I didn't believe it was possible. But, from her, I got the push to go past my fear. But I knew I had to first heal myself, before I could help heal others.”

Elisabetta did this through self-

whenever she saw my frown, she saw it as a sign of danger.”

But it was during one of these rapid sessions of deep rage, when Stella was four, that proved to be the turning point for Elisabetta. In her book she shares:

“The memory which has never left me is of the afternoon I threw myself onto Stella's bed and started to hurt her... I was screaming irrationally. Stella was crying and frozen in shock... As quickly as it had arrived, the rage left, and as my calm returned, I stumbled out of Stella's room exhausted and confused. I was consumed by a deep sense of guilt and shame. I didn't notice my little daughter silently approach me until she was right at my side. As my eyes met hers, she put her tiny hands on my knees and I heard

her gently and humbly pleading, ‘Mummy, please forgive me!’

“It was at that precise moment that a memory of my past came flooding back. I remembered all the times I had to ask forgiveness from my mum as a little child, just as Stella was doing then... A voice from deep within surfaced and spoke to me, ‘Look at you, Elisabetta! It is you who should be begging for forgiveness from your daughter... Aren't you ashamed?’ I realise today that it was the voice of my conscience... I knew I needed help.”

That was in 1996. Twelve years on, Elisabetta says she has finally found resolution. “I learnt to set myself free of my past. I knew I'd found resolution when I was able to shift from focusing only on the negative of the abuse to the gifts it

Photography by Myen and Azilda / Hair and make-up by Cheryllyn Koh

Being A Role Model

As a life coach and motivator, Elisabetta Franzoso stresses the importance of taking care of ourselves, so that we can be good examples for our children. Use her tips to make yourself a priority:

■ **REMINDE YOURSELF AT LEAST ONCE A DAY:** “How can I give healthy (as opposed to neurotic) love and true acceptance to my children and husband when I am too tired, stressed and emotionally out of balance? When I am relaxed and in balance, all my family can just benefit from that balanced state I am in.”

■ **HAVE A DREAM BOOKLET IN YOUR BAG:** This is where you can describe the things you want and desire to feel and be in balance emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually and relationally. It could be a two-day retreat alone, a workshop to keep on developing emotionally or intellectually or a nurturing afternoon tea with your best friend.

■ **TAKE TIME OUT FOR YOURSELF:** For a few moments each day, do this exercise of “appreciation” for who you are, what you did the day before, for the results you achieved in the past few months. Appreciation will give you a positive mindset, and those around you will benefit from this attitude.

■ **SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP:** If you find you can't make yourself a priority, Elisabetta suggests talking to a counsellor who may help you to search for the emotional root cause. A coach can help you make a plan to implement behaviours and identify actions which are preventing you from reaching the result you want. So be open to asking for help.

development workshops, counselling, yoga, meditation, movement therapy and anger management training. She is now a trained life coach and motivator specialising in communication and transformation from the inside out, hence her company name InsideOutYou Coaching and Training.

For Elisabetta, putting the book out was part of her own healing process. “It was a way for me to denounce the fact that I was an abusive mother and wife – even at the cost of losing face. I want to inspire other people to shed their masks and get real. I want them to know you can change and choose a different way of living. I grew up stronger as a result of the abuse... and the struggle to survive. From this, I received many hidden gifts – my present strength, confidence, positive attitude and joy!”

WIN THIS one for \$245
*To win a copy of Elisabetta's book, turn to page 194. Or you can order online at www.stellasmum.com.