

# #50 – Why Talking About Mental Health Builds Stronger Kids with Sandra Lau

**Donna Ferris:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens.

I'm your host, Donna Ferris, and today we have professional vocalist, songwriter, and mental health advocate Sandra Lau with us.

A little bit about Sandra. Sandra grew up the child of a schizophrenic mother and, as a result, longed for consistent maternal love and protection. Her experience inspired her to create a YouTube channel and Facebook page called *I Hear You* for Children of Schizophrenics.

Sandra, thank you so much for joining us on Bounce Back Stronger. I'm so honored to have you on the podcast.

**Sandra Lau:** Oh, Donna, thank you so much for the invitation. Thank you. Honored to be.

**Donna Ferris:** Thank you.

We met Mira Bartok who was on the podcast earlier. You interviewed her for *I Hear You*, right?

**Sandra Lau:** Right.

**Donna Ferris:** And she wrote a book called *The Memory Palace* [00:01:00] about her experience with her mother and how she was able to relate more to her mother's journey as a schizophrenic after her brain injuries.

That was a fascinating way to look at such a complicated subject. And maybe you can share a little bit about your journey with your mother and, how that brought you to want to be an advocate for other children with schizophrenic family members.

**Sandra Lau:** Right. I was lucky enough to have a pre and an after-schizophrenia mom.

So, I enjoyed a loving, affectionate mom up until the age of about seven or eight. So around the age of eight, my mom started presenting or she, became depressed and gradually isolated.

And then the symptoms came about, which, is hallucinations, she would talk on her own and would [00:02:00] become easily provoked or just very odd behavior that, as a child, you don't understand. All it does is create a sense of insecurity and fear. And then my parents had a very intense dynamic. You know, they fought a lot before the schizophrenia came along.

So our home life was a little intense in that sense. And then, when schizophrenia came along, my whole world turned upside down because you look to your parents when you're a child for stability, and it's not there; it's gone, it's gone. And the ideal thing would be to have the other parent at home being the principal guardian, and my dad did the best he could, but it was also hard for him, having been married to a woman who changed.

So that was really hard. As an adult now, you know, being on my own journey and carrying so many things over the years and [00:03:00] pained by this experience, because as a child and as a daughter, you look to your mum nurturance, which is gone. And so I've been on a very long journey of healing, and what I did a few years ago was I started finding, well, I would look for resources, I would look for information, medical information that could help me fill in a lot of the gaps in terms of the medical insight.

But the first book I ever found was Mira's book about her experience; it just went straight to my heart. And that's why I approached her. And I'm blown away that I'm even friends with her now because that book just marked me and when she said, yes, I'll do the interview. And she's so lovely.

What happened for me is that this other world opened up, which was, there are other people in the world who have gone through this experience, just like me, and it [00:04:00] validated Sandra from many years ago—Sandra as a child, an adolescent, a young woman. Then it just was like, I've got to keep reading.

But during the pandemic, I shared with a friend that I, nobody knows this actually, but I started writing a memoir about my own experience with mum and difficult that was because every person. Reacts to situations differently, even when I look at my brother, how he's reacted with this sort of trauma, because you do live with post-traumatic stress all of the time.

And so what happened for me was I realized that other people had gone through this. For me, it had been so isolating for my brother as well. We had pretty much grown up thinking, well, this is the way it is. Tough luck for us. This is weird. This is sad. It's frustrating. It makes me angry. More than [00:05:00] anything, it makes me completely sad.

But when I read Mira's book, I was like, "Oh my God, this is amazing." And I started writing the memoir, but in the pandemic, what happened? As a vocalist, our industry was the first to close down and the last to come back. So, not only was I struggling with the fact that my savings were evaporating before my eyes, we were all trying to find productive ways to make our time.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah.

**Sandra Lau:** And so I shared with a friend, I said I started writing a memoir about the experience I have with my mom. You know, she has schizophrenia and he had the foresight. He said, "Sandra, you need to finish that book. But in the meantime, why don't you open a fan page on Facebook? And, start sharing some information there have got to be thousands of people out there like you."

I called it, *I hear you* because that's what my memoir has always been [00:06:00] called. That's how it's going to be released. And you might think, or people might think, I hear you has the connotation from schizophrenia, the voices that people hear, I hear you, I hear the voices all the time, but really it's because I could hear my mom all the time and I would say to her, I hear you.

I hear you. I can hear you talking and there's nobody there with you. You know, that's one of the hardest things that as a child, I couldn't understand. And really what the channel is about is giving other people, like myself, resources. So that they can lean on them or learn new ways to cope. Really, it's my dream page that I wish I could have had when I was a teenager.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, that's amazing. And that's such a gift, to do that. Because it's healing for you to take care of your inner [00:07:00] child, by creating this page that will help some others that are going through the same thing. It's really amazing.

**Sandra Lau:** Thank you. Yeah, it's been a great experience but what I've seen is there's the validation, first of all, that you can talk about wacky things, you know, that you go through with a mentally ill person who, just has these behaviors at times that I could only talk about with my brother.

And all of a sudden I'm meeting people who have gone through this experience and the level of depth that you can go to so fast with somebody is incredible because there's an understanding and there's no shame.

**Donna Ferris:** Yes, it's so funny I was thinking shame but I didn't want to say it. And that is such a thing.

It's such a thing because in our culture, we don't allow for mental health differences. Did you know there's a smaller [00:08:00] city in Japan where schizophrenics go there's actually a place that they can go and live and then they are together. I'll have to send you the link. So they're allowed to be together and they're not weird in that place because they all hear the things and all this stuff.

This is normal for somebody with schizophrenia. So they want to be in a place where they feel normal. It's a really great article. I think there was a documentary done about it as well. You might actually look into it. I'll send the information.

And I totally understand as a child or as a relative of somebody with schizophrenia, there is a shame about it because you're like, they're weird and different and you can't really understand it and nobody's talking about it. It's just happening. And that's why, I think it's so important to have Facebook pages and have people talking about it because they can't help it.

There's nothing they can do except for take the meds in most cases and do the work around it, but it's hard. There are people inside and if somebody had been able to talk to you as a child about it. It would have [00:09:00] been different. I think same with Mira.

Mira had to do what she had to do, for her sanity with her mom, but she loved her and I love how she documented all of the things that were so special miraculous about her in the process of trying to find a way to piece it together for her own mental health.

**Sandra Lau:** Right. I think that's one of the things that would have impacted and probably changed the course of many factors in my life when I was a kid and probably for any other kid with a mentally ill parent. And it goes for parents with addiction as well, because talking about people who are living an alternate reality, it's not the reality that the rest of us share, this is what I hope is happening today.

So if there are social workers and psychological support for the kids. If the illness is explained, if somebody had to sit down and said, Sandra, your mom, she's probably been behaving, you know, [00:10:00] in a weird manner, right. And, as a child, you don't lie. Kids don't lie. They're very innocent.

And so if it had been explained. Your mom's going to continue to behave in this way. More than likely, you're going to hear her talking to herself. She might have violent outbreaks. She might go out into the street and start screaming for no apparent reason. Then things would have been different because I really struggled with that.

I didn't know what was wrong with my mom. It was probably 11 years later when we got the actual diagnosis and it's chronic schizophrenia and most patients don't want to continue their medication. They'll be stable for a while and then they'll just say, don't want to do it anymore.

And so the family spirals out. Everybody's a victim and most of the resources are just channeled toward the patient, which is valid. It's absolutely valid, but there should be psychological support offered to everyone. [00:11:00] Yeah. To all of the family members especially, people don't talk about the partners, my dad - I mean, he struggled so much and then he started gambling and it was his escape and then the children and what about the siblings and what about the parents?

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. They don't feel comfortable talking about it with anyone.

**Sandra Lau:** I hope that it's changed. I remember I think I was about 17, and my best friend, Jess, I have two best friends in Australia we grew up together and they're just such kind people.

And it's tough. I'm going to get a little emotional because kids can be so cruel and so part of all of this is you got to keep it a secret. Yeah. You can't share that your mum is off because, oh, she's a loony tune. Oh, your mum's kikoo. You know, those sorts of things. And my friends were just really understanding, you know, [00:12:00] and I had that. At least I had that and there was no judgment, but there are kids that have no one and what, what is going to happen with them, you know, because you carry all of these things. I mean, look I'm 44

**Donna Ferris:** and still,

**Sandra Lau:** Oh yeah, it's still a wound.

**Donna Ferris:** Talking about it is really important And it's not just schizophrenic parents. There are deeply depressed parents, and there are deeply anxious parents, and there's all kinds of spectrum here. And talking about it is really important and all the things that you're bringing up, the fact that it's not just the person and if anybody actually diagnoses it, it's not just that diagnosis and that treatment, but, it's the whole family that's affected.

I mean, you connected it to addiction and it is similar. We have a lot of support systems for addiction although maybe not enough, we have Al Anon for the family members. There is something here that's a really good point, for [00:13:00] people who have loved ones with mental health challenges.

And schizophrenia is certainly one of them. So maybe let's take a moment to. Think about how you've coped, right? So music was certainly an important coping. We've talked a little bit about channeling into writing, which is a great one, and channeling it into connecting because you're hitting a lot of the things that really help us get through difficult times.

Connection is a huge one. Finding other people that have experienced what we've been through and learning from them, but also just feeling that you're heard in them. Tell me a little bit about how music has helped you as a outlet and what songs or what things you do to kind of lift you during these times.

Cause you've done a lot. You've coped well with the really difficult. childhood.

**Sandra Lau:** Oh, thank you. I'm so glad it seems that way.

**Donna Ferris:** You've done well, but we all feel that way, right? My favorite quote right now is imposters don't get imposter syndrome, but I think we kind of feel that way sometimes.

We're [00:14:00] imposters all the time, but, just know, imposters don't get imposter syndrome, so we're good.

**Sandra Lau:** Right, yeah, this is hard. I mean, I will share how music impacted me and helped me cope, but in the end, you've just got to keep saying yes to life and living. So, no matter what you're going through, this is what I've realized at 44 years of age: it doesn't matter how hard it gets.

Just pick yourself up and keep going. And if it's a particularly hard day, just do one thing, at least one thing that's productive that is taking you closer to your

goal. Don't let one day go by wasted. It's fine if all you can muster up is getting home, curling up in bed, and maybe watching a movie.

Give yourself that. Don't be too hard on yourself; pick yourself up and keep going.

**Donna Ferris:** That's such good advice.

**Sandra Lau:** Yeah, you just have to keep going. I [00:15:00] mean, it's so hard, and I was talking to a girlfriend last night, and she said it doesn't matter which door you knock on; every single family has problems.

Every single person has issues. And there's comfort in that Donna, because when I grew up, I was like, it's only me. This is only happening to us. God, why did you pick my mum to live this?

Because look at us, I mean, my family just fractured because of the illness. And so I find comfort in that, that what I'm living actually is just what we know as life, the living experience. And so that takes a lot of pressure off too, because it, it doesn't matter what your goals are.

Happiness isn't something that you aspire to reach and sustain. It doesn't happen that way. Life doesn't happen that way.

**Donna Ferris:** It's true. And to get back to the music, because I think that there are things that lift [00:16:00] us, and you just said that, find one thing that will lift you in your day.

That is a huge practice. It's a really important one. It's one of the ones that I really glommed on to, and how can you find one thing that will lift you? And for me, it was writing my way through it. At the time, I had a relationship with the Elephant Journal, and I was writing frequently about the things that were happening, and they were resonating.

So that was really, really helpful. And what you're doing with *I Hear You* is similar. I think music probably has it, too. There's an energy in our body because of the feelings that we're having, and it's important to try to find ways to convert the energy into something productive or release it, right?

There are a lot of ways to release it, including yoga and Reiki, but music and dancing are really great ways to do that.

**Sandra Lau:** Absolutely. Yeah. When I was, I think nine years old, I discovered I could sing. I remember the sensation. I felt [00:17:00] like this, like a whole new world.

I felt that, “What is happening? What is this?” And this passion for music that just woke up inside of me because when I love a song, I will put it on repeat, and it inspires me, and I'll clean my house. As the years went on and my mum's illness became far more severe in terms of her symptoms, I would lock myself up in my room, and I would just sing; I would belt out my voice because that was the way that I found release and that I could feel some relief.

It was really hard because the whole time, you just feel like a pressure cooker, you know, just one more thing that you're adding that you're hiding away somewhere and stepping out into the world as if nothing's wrong, and you just got to hide it and suppress it. And so I would sing, and I started writing songs when I was 14.

I do a lot of writing. I think that's. [00:18:00] something that's really helped me and that I recommend as well as I think you would too. It's a way of just really emptying out everything that we have inside that sometimes you can't even talk to somebody about. Maybe you can talk about it down the road, but maybe at the specific moment, you can't, and writing is a good companion.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. I mean, I think you'll find it as you're writing your memoir, and I know you're writing it now. I think I did not know my story until I finished it. I think that I needed to kind of step away from it. Going through it so many times, you really start to see what's happening in your life and how some things fit together.

I just finished the second book. It was all about things I learned from the first, right? So it's more of a self-help book because the first was a memoir. Even when I gave it to my sister to read, it still had stuff about my mother.

I was almost ready to publish it, and I gave it to my sister to read. And she had a very different relationship with my mother because of the [00:19:00] timing. We're a little bit different in age and she had a slightly different mother than I did. And I was able to kind of step back and go, I can't call her the things I used to call her, because now I recognize that I got her in a period that she was probably in a pretty massive depression, and I bore the brunt of it. I learned even more by writing that second book. I learned even more about her, and I was able to step back even further and say, okay, I can see this a little bit more as a witness as opposed to the pain of being the child of this person. So writing



is incredibly helpful for the connection, the release, and the stepping back and saying, oh this is what happened, really. It gives you such distance. If I hadn't written the memoir, I probably wouldn't have been able to get the distance from my losses. This second book has allowed me to really write down a process that I've figured out for myself, with the hope that some of the pieces will help other people.

**Sandra Lau:** Yeah, [00:20:00] I read a book called *The Artist's Way*. I don't know if you, yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** Yes, I could go find it. It's up on the shelf somewhere. Yep. I love it.

**Sandra Lau:** I used to do it's not poetry, just like free text, almost like I don't know. I would take songs from those texts.

But then when I read *The Artist's Way* a friend recommended it, and then, once I was in the book and it recommends you get up and do three pages in the morning, and I was like, what is this, man, I've got things to do and I'm not, three pages, as it took me a while, man. And after about ten days, I was like, "Oh, I get it."

I get it. Because you're actually emptying yourself of, whatever it is that's on your mind. I don't do it on such a consistent basis now, but I did do it yesterday morning. I was feeling offish and I just let anything and everything come out. And then I went on my way, the rest of my day, I was far more relaxed and it's that [00:21:00] space that you give yourself to be able to release whatever thought that you have without anybody, coming in and judging those thoughts. Yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. It's an incredibly helpful practice. I love that book. Do you do the artist dates?

That's one of my favorite things to do.

**Sandra Lau:** Oh yes, yes, yes, yes. Where you take time out, like do something, just a date for you. Yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** I love going to art museums. One of my favorite things to do is find a really good, artist exhibition. It just makes my day. And I'm not an artist.

I did some costume design work in my undergrad, but I just love looking at it, especially if there's an exhibition about how they get to the painting, so all the earlier drawings to get to the painting. I just love that because you can see all the decisions they make, and I find that just incredibly fascinating. It's just a great way to kind of get inspired, I think.

**Sandra Lau:** Yes, and give yourself that time, it's literally a day with [00:22:00] you. And so that's your time. It's you nurturing yourself and taking notice of yourself because usually, we're just running around, attending to so many different things. And I remember I would plan my dates, and I'd be like, what do I want to do?

Because she's really specific. She says, well, you can't have a date at home. I mean, you have to step out. Because I was like, oh man, I don't have time this week, so I might just do it here. And then it was like, yeah, but don't do it at home. You can't do it at home. That defeats the purpose of it.

Yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** She allows for not having a lot of time. So I remember one of my artist dates used to be to go into Crate and Barrel, which sounds incredibly suburban. But it was, for me, just the way they set up that store in King of Prussia for those of you who are listening in King of Prussia.

That store is just crazy gorgeous. And this is the life that I want, kind of like this streamlined, everything in order, very geometric. I'm like, yeah, [00:23:00] that's not my life. It's nice to visit it and say, gosh, that's, that's a really pretty towel.

**Sandra Lau:** I don't think it's silly or, you know superficial or, oh, I mean, look at my house.

I love it. It's so,

**Donna Ferris:** I love it so much. It's so beautiful.

**Sandra Lau:** Oh, thank you. I go out and look at plants and buy plants. So it's okay. I love it. I love it. Yeah. That's funny. I think whatever works for you. That's it. Should be okay. Yeah, okay.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, I also go to Target, just so you know. If you see me in Target, and I don't buy a lot, because, although that's not true, you can't get out of there without spending a couple hundred, but I do really like it.

I like the way it's laid out, and there's just pretty things, and you can just kind of go, oh, that could, that could make my life better.

**Sandra Lau:** Yes, I go to the supermarket. I love looking at, All of the snacks. And I have a food and travel channel, which is my passion project. Yeah, that's awesome. [00:24:00] I understand, you know, when I go to the States, I'm in Target, Ross, Marshalls, North Shore.

Marshalls,

**Donna Ferris:** And then HomeGoods. Don't even get me started on HomeGoods. This is made for me to go in there and just look, Oh, it's a season. I didn't know I needed a Valentine's season, but I do. I don't know.

**Sandra Lau:** But it just makes you feel good. It's like I just said, whatever is right for you, that's what you need to pursue, you know, if it's kind of a Target, look no further.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, it's a good example of the simple thing to kind of just lift your day a little bit. So, looking at time, what did I not ask that you really want to share?

**Sandra Lau:** For family members who are living with a mentally ill patient, don't give up hope. Look for resources and support groups. The internet nowadays is amazing. I mean, at the click [00:25:00] of a button or some keys, so many resources can open up to us. Remember that you're not alone.

Seek out family and friends and seek out what is good for you. Just like now we mentioned going to Target whatever works for you, do that and know that you're not alone in this experience. And I'm a spiritual person. I pray I'm not religious, but I find solace in prayer.

And when you are feeling desperate, lonely, sad, frustrated, angry, send a prayer up and you will find solace. And seek out help if you feel lonely as well. It's a very difficult experience to go through, but really we are not alone.

**Donna Ferris:** And the Facebook and the YouTube channel is *I Hear You*.

**Sandra Lau:** Yes, *I Hear You*. It's called *I Hear You Children of Schizophrenics* on Facebook and on YouTube it's called *I Hear You*, but I mean, type out children of [00:26:00] schizophrenics so that it will come up.

**Donna Ferris:** Well, I want to say thank you so much for being with me today and this is going to be so helpful for our listeners. So thank you.

**Sandra Lau:** Thank you, Donna, for having me.

**Donna Ferris:** Absolute, absolute pleasure.

**Sandra Lau:** Thank you.

That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Sandra's YouTube channel, Facebook page, or other offerings, those links will be in the episode notes.

Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family.

That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit. And if my daughters Sienna and Sylvie are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you, and I love you so much. so much. Bye now.