

OVERCOMING *TOXIC AIR*

A path to healing and
hope-filled exhales

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hope-filled exhales

HEATHER LAMBERT, LPC, CSC



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Published by Best Seller Publishing®, Pasadena, CA

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-949535-94-5

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ENDORSEMENTS

The hateful rhetoric so prevalent in our culture today undermines the healthy psychological and emotional development of our children. When we breathe out the same poisonous words we breathe in, the air our children breathe also becomes toxic.

In her book *Overcoming Toxic Air*, counselor and author Heather Lambert challenges us to be intentional in our efforts to clear the air of all that makes it difficult for our children to live a life of hope and promise. It starts with us...with the air we exhale...with the words we speak. Our legacy...our influence...matters.

Heather Lambert is a gifted counselor with a passion for helping the most vulnerable among us. If you're a parent, an educator or just someone who loves children, read this book. Let it touch your heart as it did mine.

Dr. Kirk Lewis
Superintendent of Schools (Retired)

Oh how necessary Heather's work is to our world...especially right now. As a mom of four, a former teacher, a foster/adoptive mom and lover of injured humans, this work speaks to my soul. I've spoken to, written for and worked with tens of thousands of people over my career...but even if my work had only made a difference with Heather Lambert and her resulting mission...it would've been worth my entire life investment. She is changing lives and families and our world, one fresh breath at a time.

Carrie Wilkerson,
Author and speaker

This text is a must-read! Three words I would use to describe Heather: Visionary, Innovative and Genuine. This text will provide real and raw experiences that can help you begin to think differently about how you really are doing in this moment. These real-world stories, lessons and personal insight opportunities will provide you with thought-provoking self-reflection questions to help guide you to overcome toxic air.

Natalie Fikac, EdD, Founder
Be Well, Lead Well

Personal and practical. *Overcoming Toxic Air* is the oxygen mask we all need right now to begin our personal healing with practical steps that can, in turn, be used to help others.

Carlete Metoyer, MA, LPC, CCFP
CSM Counseling Solutions

I just finished reading the intro and I AM HOOKED! Heather writes as she leads—with heart, passion, and a deep-rooted seed to make a difference in your lifetime. As soon as I started reading, I felt a book study coming on! Heather is such a beautiful person inside and out, and I have no doubt her words, thoughts and guidance will be meaningful to readers.

Cynthia Anderson, Executive Director, Special Programs
La Porte ISD

I'm so excited for you and really excited for even more people to be impacted by you through this book. I can't wait to read the whole thing. I'm already hooked. And what an honor that you included me in something so near and dear to your heart. It really means everything to me. I love working with you, and I pray we can find more opportunities in the future to impact folks together!

Mandy Benedix, Mentor Specialist
Pearland ISD and owner of Rooted Together, LLC

Heather Lambert is fearless and amazing! She left the safety of a well-paying, steady position as the lead counselor in a prestigious school district to create accessible counseling services for the biggest county in Texas. Like many leaders in history, Heather “burned her boats”; she ditched her Plan B and jumped right into her dream, her heart’s calling. Now she has written this wonderful book which further advances her teachings and her beautiful heart’s mission. Be prepared to hear your own “heart’s calling” and to be inspired by this book, *Overcoming Toxic Air*.

Mari Soulforce Devlin

I am not surprised by Heather Lambert's successful business and her recent book, *Overcoming Toxic Air: A Path to Healing and Hope-filled Exhales*. As colleagues I first noticed Heather's passion and energy; it was like fresh air in a stale place. I knew she was unique and possessed gifts that would lead to great things. She was a faith-based, caring woman with a big heart. I was quickly attracted to her personality and wanted to befriend her. We joined forces in making changes in our profession. Her desire was to be accepted as a professional and make surmountable changes to help others. Heather accomplishes this within the book. She always had the best interest of others as a leader and sought to share ways for people to overcome toxic air. I was not surprised when I learned she left her stable job to begin her calling. I still remember sitting at a workshop on mental health when I saw Heather's name mentioned on the presentation. I reached out to her later that evening to let her know I had seen her work and congratulated her. I let her know I admired her braveness in starting her practice. I have not forgotten her response that has stayed with me all these years. With such certainty she responded, "I had to take the leap in order for God to catch me." Simple words that left a lasting impression on me. I was amazed with her confidence in her abilities and courage to take the leap. I feel that was what Heather set out to do with her work, to give it her all, for the intention to improve her surroundings, as well as for others, and to glorify God. I have no doubt Heather will have many more great accomplishments in the future and her book is just the beginning of greater things to come.

Claudia Harmon, Director of School-Based Services
Clearhope Counseling & Wellness Center

What a challenge, fun-filled, God-trusting ride it's been with you!! One word that comes to mind every time I think of you is FAITH. You have the Faith that can move mountains, you TRUST like no other, and I absolutely LOVE when God shows off!! I know He brought us together for this wild ride. Pray BIG because He answers BIG! "He is an abundance God," Heather Lambert!

Cassie Pullig, Office Manager
Clearhope Counseling & Wellness Center

"Look at the birds," Matthew 6:26a (NLT). The story of the canaries and their purpose of helping the miners was so profound. The canaries' purpose was to help discern the air quality, not just for themselves but to help the miners understand when the air quality wasn't productive. As a counselor (helper), Heather lives, moves, and breathes helping those around her breathe cleaner air by removing access barriers to quality mental health, which is her purpose, with passion. *Overcoming Toxic Air* is an amazing read where Heather shares 12 steps to hope and healing.

Frances Germany, Director
Sugarland Clearhope Counseling & Wellness Center

Heather is such an amazing leader in the counseling field, and you can't help but learn and grow after every interaction with her. She truly has such astounding and beneficial knowledge that is conveyed through the compassion and excitement in her writing. This book is undeniably a gem and a much-needed guide to have which has come at the perfect time!

Ashley Gonzalez, MS, LPC, LCDC, CTRP-C
Lead Clinician, Clearhope Counseling & Wellness Center

When we met Heather we all knew there was nothing that was going to stop her from being successful!!

Art Klebba, SCORE Mentor

I have had the privilege of working with Heather daily for over a year. The words that she speaks and the absolute true passion she has for others and their wellbeing has truly been a blessing and has personally sparked a change in me. I have no doubt that the words in this book will provoke an unbelievable change and awakening to all who read it. These words are true and real and from the heart of the therapist you never wanted but definitely needed!

Sarah Sherlin

Clearhope Counseling & Wellness Center

I am so excited for all the wonderful things that God is doing in your life. I truly believe that those platforms are becoming more and more evident because you have been faithful in stepping into them...The honor of being a small part of what God down through me is something that I truly cherish. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your journey. I endorse you, in the book and in life. I think this will be a powerful resource for the body of Christ, empowering every member to walk in God's holistic healing power.

Pastor Mike Obadja

Abbalove Church, Chino Hills, California

THE CANARY CONCEPT

As recently as 1986 in the coal mining regions of the United States, miners journeying deep into the mines carried canaries in small cages. The canaries would serve two purposes. First, they became a mascot of sorts, an encouraging little companion to care for and notice during the days of long work. Second, they were an important safety meter. If the canary happily sang and swung in its cage, as canaries should, the miners knew they were safe to continue their work. However, if the canary stopped and dropped, toxic air was undoubtedly present. The miners knew they must quickly grab the canary and run fast toward the clean air as if their lives depended on it, because they did.

I would contend that we have a canary meter system in place today. The air is constantly being gauged for its levels of toxicity. The canaries are our children, and they continue to serve two purposes. We know, as a society, to notice them and how we collectively feel when they are well and enjoying the pleasures of the lives we work diligently to provide. We, then, must also know that when they stop singing and swinging, the air has become too toxic for them to thrive. When we realize this,

we must not dawdle, but run fast toward clean air as if all our lives depend on it, because they do.

The collective group of young ones are a gauge for the air we are creating. Our every exhale collectively creates the air our children breathe, the environment they will grow and develop in, and the way they learn how the air should feel and be. The Centers for Disease Control data reveals that “Over the past 20 years, suicide rates have skyrocketed by over 60 percent among children, with almost every suicide indicator and student population showing increasing trends.”¹ The report, by Asha Z. Ivey-Stephenson, PhD, concludes, “Suicide is a leading cause of death among youths; however, many more youths are at risk for suicide as a result of experiencing suicidal ideation, making suicide plans, and attempting suicide, making a focus on nonfatal suicidal behavior a crucial public health priority.”² The data is startling, and many programs, investments, research projects, and collective attempts are underway to reduce this dangerous trend. But should we begin to ask the ever-important question, *Why?* Why are our canaries, whom we believe should be the picture of carefree health and happiness, becoming so full of despair that one in five seriously considers suicide? Perhaps it is the air they breathe, the air we are creating for them.

Bullying, belittling, canceling, condemning, and excluding are a normal part of most students’ days. Their days are not too different than ours. The air has toxic undertones, and adults are coping in increasingly unhealthy ways. These frequently accessed maladaptive coping measures include alcohol, drugs, sex, spending, venting, ranting, and bingeing. However, many of these coping skills are restricted or not available to students. So, they binge on social media, seeking connection and care from a world that feels very real to them when adults are not present, or worse, present but not available. But, in the unmonitored, widespread reach of social media where young people frequently find

the community they need, they find a toxicity that mirrors what they are trying to escape. So where do our canaries go to breathe fresh, clean, healing air? Where are the safe spaces, places, and people in their lives? Do we even notice their need for encouragement, love, care, and connection? Do we even care? Or is it possible we also are gasping and barely able to survive?

What and who are creating this toxic environment? Could it be all of us? In the current era, do we find ourselves armchair therapists, analysts, experts, and reporters who are caught up in the craze of canceling the ideas and views of others in a way that is harmful, hurtful, and even dangerous? Do our opinions matter more than people? Is our attempt to feel honored made through demeaning others while demanding their respect? Are our own inner strivings creating a culture of strife experienced by all?

Are we so unhappy with who we are that we cannot possibly be happy with anyone else? Are we personally injured or clean air-deprived so that we cannot engage in life fully but instead, out of our own hurt and unmet needs, we lunge in hurtful ways toward others? Is our own personal worth and value assigned only by what we do, produce, have, or by the number of people who will listen to and like our rants? Do we push and try and then collapse and quit several times each day, week, or month? Do we believe we matter? Do we believe anyone matters? If we realize how toxic the air is becoming, by our own efforts to inhale coupled with our own acknowledgment of unhealthy exhales, how do we improve our collective air quality? Can we develop a plan to shift the air? Could we possibly make a difference?

This book has one simple goal: To help clear the toxic air—for you, for me, for all of us. Our children, our canaries, are daily demonstrating that this culture has created such toxic air that the youngest among us cannot survive if we do not act, now. So, will you join me? Will you

consider the twelve steps in this book, doing the brave work of personal reflection, and develop a plan for YOU to overcome the toxic air culture and create a path to healthy and hope-filled exhales? I believe you can do it! I believe I can do it! And, I believe together, we can change the air we all breathe!

STEP 1:

KNOW YOUR MISSION

She went to algebra class. Because that is what you do after you have been picked up from lunch by your online boyfriend to finally meet face-to-face. But the experience was not at all what she expected. Brutally sexually assaulted, then dropped back off on the high school campus, the best thing to do was get back to normal, so she went to class. I am so thankful for a caring trauma-informed school nurse who, sensing that something was terribly wrong when the girl asked for an ice pack for pain the next day, reached out to the school counseling office. This little canary was injured and hurting, and we needed to help. I'll name this canary Esperanza, because her story began the journey that would change the course of my life and give birth to my mission of hope.

Esperanza's parents had come to the United States as immigrants, excited to provide a better opportunity for their only child. They wanted her to be safe and to have every possible opportunity. They were strict, working to protect her from a world that can be cruel and dangerous. She was not allowed to be on social media or to have a boyfriend. Instead, she was told to focus on her studies. The shock I saw on their faces as they came into our offices and hugged their daughter caused my heart to wrench in pain. Repeatedly they asked in Spanish, "How could this happen?" It is very difficult to be the school counselor and have no answers. I simply sat and let them cry out in pain, with only tissues and a caring look to help connect with them in the midst of traumatic pain that pierced my own soul. I sat with them until they could cry no more, then I normalized their shock and fear and gave mom a cab fare card to return to my office the next day so we could consider the next steps to help connect Esperanza to the care she would need for her mental health and healing.

When Esperanza and her mom returned the next day, I explained that healing would be slow and ongoing therapy would be required. I inquired about insurance and learned the student had a Medicaid insurance plan, very common in our area. I also learned her mom would need afternoon appointments since the father was able to drive her then, after he'd worked long hours. This began our day together. Armed with the district's resource book, including a list of counseling centers in the area, I began to make calls to schedule an appointment for Esperanza. As the hours passed, I had to put the school resource book aside and resort to online searches. Call after call resulted in no answer, no Spanish-speaking therapists available, a months-long wait, or they could not accept the student's insurance. Although I thought this connection to support would take less than an hour, I spent the entire day with this family and, after calling every single possible solution,

I was forced to send mom and daughter home with a half-hearted promise, “I’ll get back to you when someone returns my message.” I had a sinking feeling no such return call would come.

At the end of this day, exhausted, frustrated, and confused, I closed the door to my school counselor’s office and in desperation lifted my hands toward the heavens and cried out, “God, someone has to do something!” I was startled to hear the call in my soul—*Yes, Heather, it is YOU!*

“ME?” I questioned. I had taught high school Spanish for twelve years, had worked as a school counselor for five, and had completed my license as a professional counselor only about three years prior. What could I do?

This is a question that we are all faced with at one point or another in our life journeys: What can I do? I wonder if we ever fully consider the answers to that question. I wonder if we contemplate our gifts, talents, abilities, and most of all, passions? It was Steve Jobs who said, “The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.” I found myself at a crossroads. I saw the need, but could I be the change?

A few days later, as I busied myself to quiet the plaguing idea that I could be the solution to the mental health crisis in my city, an inspirational person in my life waltzed right into my office. She sat down and we began to chat. I always loved seeing Ms. Mari Devlin. She worked as a Harris County Youth Services specialist, and she really cared. She was no ordinary caseworker. She was one of the rare individuals who, for over twenty years, had endured the heart strain and exhaustion of counseling youth and families in crisis for the police department. She was truly a breath of fresh air every single time I was privileged to work with her on a case. I do not recall many of the words of our conversation

that day in the spring of 2017, but I do remember sharing some of my internal angst with Mari about how MORE must be done.

I blamed *the system, the district, the administration*. All the while, my personal burden not addressed was contributing to toxic exhales as I grappled for a way to make a difference without changing. Mari agreed and met my frustration with kindness. Then, Mari said something I will never forget. She asked, “Have you ever heard of Carrie Wilkerson?”

“No,” I quickly replied, “Why? Should I know her?”

Mari then asked me to write down the book title *The Barefoot Executive* by Carrie Wilkerson. I complied and then Mari said, “You remind me of her!” I had no clue who Carrie Wilkerson was, but if Mari thought she was an amazing influencer, I trusted I should read the book. I could almost feel the salutary air that Mari was speaking over me. It became downright intoxicating when Mari said, “I think you can do something big! Bigger than this,” motioning to my school counseling office. I remember my stomach sinking and my heart racing. Could I be a part of the change my community needed?

I must admit, I went home and threw that note on my bathroom vanity, where it sat for months. Then, our church had a weekend of spiritual renewal where Indonesian Pastor Mike Obadja told me, “Heather, there is an invisible platform right below the surface, but you must jump before it will rise up!” Again, my soul groaned with the plaguing question, *What could I do?* After that weekend, I ordered and read *The Barefoot Executive*. I could hear Carrie challenging me to *make up my mind!* I could hear her encouraging me to *take massive action* and have *no plan B!* But I was just a school counselor. What could I do?

Have you struggled with seeing a problem so big, so disturbing, it becomes your constant, internal struggle? I do not mean it is something you think about sometimes, I mean it is a constant, unwelcome guest who shows up in every area of your life. You are constantly being tapped

on the shoulder by this struggle. This is what I was wrestling with. I had worked in education for seventeen years; I was just seven years away from being able to retire. What could I do? My husband was a pastor with a busy life and schedule, and I had three children. What could I do? We had bills and debt, and dreams and hopes. What could I do? My life was comfortable and busy. What could I do? Does any of this sound familiar? Are you feeling a similar struggle? Is it much easier to quiet this nagging pull with the demands of your current life and busyness? Or is it quieted at all? Does this internal struggle lead you to look for others to blame and scapegoat so you can get a moment of reprieve from your struggle? In this avoidance of living your mission, do you flood toxicity into the air we all breathe? Are you struggling to breathe your own air?

So, at the end of that weekend, I did something every single person would have considered crazy. After a brief discussion with my husband, when I told him I felt I should resign from my job at our school district, he replied, “I thought this was coming.” You see, our struggle, which we often believe is only internal, is frequently felt and experienced by so many we know and love. We cannot long endure internal conflict and struggle without it becoming a part of who we are and how we show up (see Step 5: Understanding Projections). That weekend, without too much thought or reservation, I wrote a resignation letter. Monday, I took that letter to my campus principal, and he asked, “Where are you going?” I remember saying, “I have no idea.” This admission shocked me to my core, as I had not said it aloud before this moment and I am the type of person who plans out my whole life, then my whole plan B, and just for good measure, a plan C. You know, just in case. I am not someone who would ever resign without a firm, good-paying position to go to. My campus principal struggled to believe that I did not have a plan, so he said, “It is okay, you can tell me, I won’t share if you don’t

want me to.” Again, shocked, I replied, “I don’t know.” I just knew I had to do something!

In July of 2017, I closed the door of the lead counselor’s office at the high school for the last time. That final click ended a seventeen-year career, and I had no idea what would come next. I founded Clearhope Counseling in 2017 with a simple goal: to remove access barriers to high-quality mental health services. I had found my mission. I had Esperanza’s story and the stories of hundreds of other students in my heart and on my mind. I had no plans to change the world, I just planned to help the people I could, if I could, as well as I could. I knew my personal life mission was based on my personal belief that “No one should hurt alone.” Armed with hope and already breathing better, I decided I would do what I could.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What about you? What is your personal mission?
- Why do you exist?
- What is your purpose?
- What is the thing that causes you stirring and angst?

Stop, reflect, and dive into you. You and your contributions can help overcome the toxic air, and your avoidance of walking into that purpose can lead you to contribute to it. Your every exhale contributes to the toxicity level or curative level of the air we all breathe. You see, you and I, we create the air we breathe. We create it for ourselves, for each other, and for the canaries who are developing, growing, and gasping for ... HOPE!