

Mike Domitrz: Welcome to the Respect podcast. I'm your host, Mike Domitrz, from MikeSpeaks.com, where we help organizations of all sizes, educational institutions, and the US military create a culture of respect. And respect is exactly what we discuss on this show, so let's get started.

Mike Domitrz: This week is Rena Romano, who's an author of her memoir, *His Puppet No More*, a professional speaker and speaking coach known as the Positivity Pro. Her mission is to lift others and help them discover their unlimited potential so that they will thrive and have the success they desire. She's a veteran of the TEDx stage and was a featured guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show. I've known Rena now for a little while. Rena, thank you so much for being on the show.

Rena Romano: Oh my goodness, Michael, thank you. It's such an honor to be here with you and your listeners.

Mike Domitrz: Well, we're thrilled to have you here. You mentioned TEDx, or I mentioned TEDx there in the intro. What made you decide to want to do a TEDx talk?

Rena Romano: It's such a big platform, obviously, it's seen by millions all over the world. And I had a message to share. What better way to share it but on the TEDx stage, where they have millions and millions of viewers?

Mike Domitrz: Yes, and your title of your talk was *Healing Sexual Abuse Can Start With One Word*. It's gone viral, so you've been able to impact millions of people through that TEDx platform because of the power of that. If you were to summarize that, somebody's like, "Hey, I might be interested in that, what's it about?" How would you do that?

Rena Romano: Well, I talk about shame and I'm getting a lot of momentum on it from the #MeToo movement this past year, on Twitter and Facebook. The main platform is to make telling safe for survivors and that makes a big difference in whether we shut down or get help. Not only making it safe to share our secrets, but also not to live in the shame of a crime that was committed against us.

Mike Domitrz: Yes. And that's so important, because in society, there's so many subtle and obvious ways that people victim blame, and then shame the survivor instead of the criminal.

Rena Romano: Absolutely. And it's like when I was raped in my own home, in my own bed, I was afraid to go to the police. I was afraid to tell anyone. I was afraid to tell my boss the next day that a colleague had broken into my home and raped me, because sadly, my boss was sexually harassing me as well. I had to find a new job, obviously.

Mike Domitrz: How do you respond to people who say, "Well, I mean, how can that be, that you're a survivor and the place you work at happens to do this? I mean, what are the odds?"

Mike Domitrz: How do you respond to that, Rena, when people have those kind of reactions to, when they meet somebody who's a multiple survivor of different forms of sexual violence?

Rena Romano: Well, at the time, Michael, I had not gotten help for my child sexual abuse, my incest. So I think predators, they're like a lion, they can sniff out their prey. I was vulnerable, I was weak. Even though I portrayed this strong, independent woman, there was subtleties about my vulnerability, and perpetrators can sense that. I worked in an all-male landscaping firm and I don't know, I just think that they can sniff it out. Like I said, I had not gotten help for my child sexual abuse at that time. Nobody knew any of my secrets.

Mike Domitrz: What I think this is so important for people to understand, they think how can a strong ... We hear this a lot, particularly towards women. How can a strong woman not speak out, or not stop that? They don't realize the compartmentalization that the mind can do in these moments, and saying that I will not look strong if I come forward. Even though that does take strength, there's this perceived idea that if I come forward, somebody's going to think of me, I was weak because I allowed this to happen to me.

Mike Domitrz: So, do you want to share why that ... Not why, but maybe even just how often that happens, that you can be a strong person and not feel strong as a survivor.

Rena Romano: I think we all wear masks in our lives. We mask our true identity, our authenticity. Being around my mother, I mean, she was a strong woman, but she came from the era where you sucked it up. You didn't put your business out on the street as if in a tabloid, like we do now, all over Facebook and Twitter, all over the internet. She was from the World War II era, and soldiers go off to war, they come home, they sucked it up, they didn't tell their stories. She didn't want me to put my story out there after I did come forward to her. I was never taught that it's okay to ask for help, because she came from that era, where you sucked it up, you went about your own business. And now we know that that's not true. Even after she started volunteering at a domestic violence shelter, she saw the importance of asking for help, that it takes more courage to ask for help.

Mike Domitrz: Yes. And that's a part that we need to stress more throughout society. I've met people in very powerful professional positions who currently, or were at the time, in very unhealthy, sexually violent relationships, that people couldn't even imagine, because they think, "That's not possible, because I know that person's professional personality. They would never let that happen."

Mike Domitrz: How do you respond to those kind of, that thinking of, "Well, that person would never let that happen."?

Rena Romano: It happens to every single one of us. It doesn't matter the status, financial status, ethnicity, background, socioeconomic level. It happens to everyone, even to strong ones. I was sharing my story not long ago and there was a

gentleman that came up and said, "I can't believe how you were able to forgive," he said, "That never happened to me, but I was just recently taken for all my money, and I'm so angry."

Rena Romano: He felt so stupid that that could happen to him. He was a smart man, degrees, lots of money, and he was taken for every bit of his money. Those type of situations can happen to all of us. Those perpetrators just know how to manipulate and coerce and twist it around so you don't even know what's happening to you until after it's happened sometimes.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and I think people often forget that, the more successful, or maybe elevated, you are in society as far as position of power, the more there can be a shame around the fact this happened. Because there's an additional element of, "Of all people, this wasn't supposed to happen to me."

Rena Romano: Exactly.

Mike Domitrz: "And society's not going to believe it because of my power, and the position I'm in," so there's this added element that can be there.

Mike Domitrz: Now, there's different elements that can be there when you're on the opposite end of the financial spectrum of, "No one will believe me because I have no credibility," so either way, this can exist and no one's going to believe me.

Rena Romano: Exactly. And so, our hands are kind of bound, per se. It's darned if you do, darned if you don't. It doesn't matter your status in life, it doesn't matter your credibility, your fame, or not. But again ... This was several years ago, when I was being sexually harassed and then my colleague raped me. I hadn't shared my story of incest at that time. I thought, "You know, people are going to blame me for this. What were you wearing? Well, my pajamas."

Mike Domitrz: Right. You were at home.

Rena Romano: I was at home, where I thought it was a safe place.

Mike Domitrz: Let's just pause there. The idea that somebody would ask in someone's own home, what you were wearing. You could have been walking around naked, it's your own home.

Rena Romano: Thank you.

Mike Domitrz: Right? I mean, that's the insane part. You could have walked outside naked, and here's the weird part. If you walked outside naked and I said to someone, "Person who walks by you naked, can you trust them?"

Mike Domitrz: Everybody knows the answer, of course you can't. But if I tell you somebody sexually assaulted somebody in their home, "What were they wearing?"

Mike Domitrz: I mean, it just doesn't make any sense whatsoever.

Rena Romano: It doesn't at all, and you know, when I was on the Oprah Winfrey show, she said that I could be running down the street naked, and as that adult should say, "Child, go home and put your clothes on."

Rena Romano: We are being blamed for the crimes committed against us. Why aren't the perpetrators being held responsible for those crimes?

Mike Domitrz: That's right, 100%. Now, you mentioned Oprah. We talked about it in the intro here. How did that come about?

Rena Romano: Oh my goodness. Well, in the height of her shows ... Oprah's show saved my life and I told her that, because I saw her come out and share her story of incest, sexual abuse, on her show. I began thinking, the more shows she had on the subject, I'm like, "Maybe this has screwed me up more than I think."

Rena Romano: I didn't realize how much of a broken soul I was at the time. You know, it was sex, drugs, rock and roll, and it wasn't all fun and games.

Mike Domitrz: Let's pause there, because I think a lot of people hear, right, the sex, drugs, rock and roll, and it wasn't all fun. And they think, "Well, I mean, a lot of people experiment and have fun with sex, drugs, and alcohol who aren't survivors. What's wrong with that?"

Mike Domitrz: But there's a difference when you're using those activities or choices to numb.

Rena Romano: Exactly. And I don't look at some of that as, yeah, I was experimenting, but a lot of it ... When it goes from fun and games to numbing, then there's a problem. It crossed over that line to where it wasn't fun and games any more. I was self abusing and self sabotaging my success long after the abuse had occurred, because I was in such pain.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah. And we don't have a society that gives us a platform for survivors, I shouldn't say us, for survivors, to feel safe in knowing that, "Here's my path forward that's safe," versus scary.

Rena Romano: Exactly. Back to Oprah, I sent in my story. I watched Mackenzie Phillips talk about incest with her father, and Mackenzie

Rena Romano: Phillips said something on their. She said it was a consensual relationship, and I remember watching that show and jumping up on my couch and screaming at Mackenzie, "No, you can't say that. There is nothing consensual about incest." It doesn't matter how old the child is. The perpetrator, the father, the brother, the cousin, whatever, they manipulate and coerce people into committing these acts, and we are so broken that we want to be loved so badly, we want that attention that we just ... I froze. She froze. And yes, there is some participation

or tolerance on our behalf because we are so broken. But I sent that story to Oprah.

Mike Domitrz: So you went this story after watching Mackenzie. Like that upset you. So then you sent your story into Oprah in reaction to the Mackenzie Phillips interview.

Rena Romano: Yes.

Mike Domitrz: Okay. And for listeners to know, Mackenzie Phillips is an actress in a show back from the '80s called One Day At A Time. But she has done stuff since. But most well known for that.

Rena Romano: Absolutely. And so her father is John Phillips from Mamas and Papas. So that was my point was there is nothing consensual about incest. Incest isn't only just a blood relative, Michael, that people need to understand. Looks like at the Larry Nassar scandal with the Olympic gymnasts, he is a coach to these young ladies. Coaches, teachers, that can be a form of incest too because we are so close to these people. These are the adults, and just to let you know, I got a thank you from one of the Larry Nassar survivors thanking me for my TedX Talk too.

Mike Domitrz: Oh, wow. That's awesome.

Rena Romano: Yes. She's going on to become a speaker and share her story as well. So that's how it all came down. I went on Oprah. I literally jumped ship to be on Oprah. I was on a cruise with my family, and they said, "Okay. We're going to do the show." So they sent me a airplane ticket at one of the ports and picked me up in a stretch limo.

Mike Domitrz: Well, they took good care of you.

Rena Romano: Yes, they did. So I sat next to my mentor, my hero, the woman that saved my life, and I shared with my story.

Mike Domitrz: So how many years ago is this, just for our listeners to understand?

Rena Romano: That was in 2009, October.

Mike Domitrz: Pretty close to when the show was going off the air.

Rena Romano: Yeah. I can't remember the last year her show went off, but yeah. I'm one of the 25,000-30,000 people, guests she had on her show in those 25 years. So I was honored to do it. It was scary as all get out.

Mike Domitrz: Let's pause there because that's a powerful statement because when somebody hasn't done a national show appearance, they don't realize why. I think their thing is, "Well, it's scary because you're afraid you might say the wrong thing."

So why is it ... There's got to be more than that. So what are the fears that can show up when you know you're about to go tell your story on national TV, on Oprah of all places?

Rena Romano: I was scared to death but something was driving me, Michael. I don't know what it is. My purpose, my God pushing me, some force was pushing me to send that email and get on that plane and go. I just knew I had to do it. And for a couple years before being on Oprah, I told people, "I'm going to be on the Oprah Winfrey Show," and they're like, "Yeah, sure, Rena. Sure, okay. There goes the crazy lady." I said, "No, I'm going to be on Oprah Winfrey Show."

Rena Romano: One thing that I say in my TedX Talk, I grew tired of being ashamed of crimes I didn't commit, and I'm tired of seeing survivors being blamed for being sexually assaulted. I'm sick of it. I'm tired of it. We do nothing wrong, but we are the ones blamed.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and over and over again and around the world.

Rena Romano: Yes. All over the world. There's millions of us. I mean, people can look at the data, the data I've given on my TedX Talk that with the results one in four girls, one in six boys is sexually assaulted before they're 18, but with those results, further studies have shown that there are roughly 42 million adults, survivors in the United States alone. But then again they say that is a low figure because so many rapes and child sexual abuse goes unreported.

Mike Domitrz: Yes. Yeah. I mean, the odds of somebody before today's current society and even in today's current society, the odds of somebody coming forth 30 years ago, oh my goodness. There was nobody was talking about it. And then you look at 20 years ago, still odds ... And even today the odds are very slim because we're not having detailed conversations. We're having outraged conversations. Well, outraged conversations doesn't create safety necessarily for survivors. This is a problem that's happening, but then we're not stopping and going, "Okay. What are signs we could look for in the home that it is happening or that it has happened." We're not having those heart to hearts.

Rena Romano: No, we're not having those heart to hearts, and I love the post that you put on your Facebook about educating our young men and boys. It's not what should the survivor do but it's what can we do to prevent turning our young society into predators and into perpetrators. What can we do to educate young people that this is so wrong, and you're right, we need to start having calm, intellectual conversations because I was suicidal. I came very close to killing myself, and there are a lot of survivors that are dying by suicide.

Mike Domitrz: Yes, and people don't realize. "Well, I don't understand what they're taking their life. Tomorrow's another day." But that tells you how much trauma is there that you can't see through the cloud to see there's a tomorrow. Not a tomorrow that's worthy of living in their mind and not realizing this will get better. But you

can't believe that sometimes when you're in that kind of pain. It's hard to believe. And so what are key things that you would want a survivor to know? If someone's listening right now and they're in that space, what would you want them to know, Rena?

Rena Romano: It's not your fault. I don't care where you were, what you were doing, it's not your fault, dear one. It is not. And there are people who will believe you and I have resources on my website at [RenaRomano.com](http://RenaRomano.com), and I know that you do too, Michael. But RAIN, the National Suicide Hotline. There's National Domestic Violence Hotlines. There's lots of numbers that people from all over the world can call and they will be believed. Start the conversation. I'm honest with people. If you're starting the healing process, it's tough but it's so worth it.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and I think you said something really important there. The first one was know it's not your fault. Two, you will be believed. Someone will believe you. This is what I love that you said, start the conversation. Speak to someone. We're not saying who to speak to. we're not trying to tell you how to speak about it. But give yourself the freedom to be able to speak the words, the pain that you're feeling to someone because Renee Brown talks about this. The more we keep it in the dark, the more it grows. So if we keep pain inside, it just keeps building up and getting bigger and more of us is being taken over by it. Versus if we start to speak it, it can be said, it releases some of that from inside to the rest of the world, not just to us. And that's what freedom, that's a release of pain.

Rena Romano: Absolutely. We have to start that conversation, and in my TedX Talk, I say that I know that remaining silent does not work because I was suicidal. I hadn't told anyone. I was afraid, and I was taught that asking for help was a weakness. But when I finally did call the crisis center, the man on the phone was calming, gentle. He made me feel safe, and he made me feel proud that I had the courage to call. That was so huge.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah. I tell people all the time ... They'll say, "Mike, what do I say if a survivor comes forward to me?" My sister, my brother. And they think they're supposed to first say, "Just so you know I believe you," but that actually can be harmful if you don't put it in the right context. So what I always tell them is if somebody first comes forward to you, thank them. Say thank you for sharing.

Rena Romano: Thank you for your courage.

Mike Domitrz: I was just going to say that's the second sentence I say. Thank you for sharing. Clearly you are strong, you are courageous. What can I do to help? What can I do to be of support? Then you listen. That's the key. Now if they say, "I don't think anyone's going to believe me," then you go, "I believe you." But if you jump right away with, "Just so you know, I believe you," it can also give an image that no one else is going to. We need to be very careful about that and for so long people made that mistake of saying, "Make sure you tell survivors, 'I

believe you." And they did it with such passion, it almost implied no one else does, but I do, and that can be very harmful.

Rena Romano: That can be harmful, and I encourage people to go to YouTube, look up my TedX Talk. I'm receiving thank you's from survivors and loved ones from all over the world. It's giving them an idea of how to listen without interruption or judgment, and then congratulate them on their courage and strength to persevere because one of the things that we need or we must focus on is our courage and strength to persevere during and after what we went through.

Mike Domitrz: Yes. I think that's really important. I think people assume that during, they forget the after.

Rena Romano: After it can be just as painful because we're compartmentalizing, we're numbing, we're dying by suicide. We're living through addictions to cover up the horrific pain. See, I didn't suppress my memories. I suppressed the pain of what happened to me.

Mike Domitrz: Right. Yeah, and that's the difference that people don't realize, and that's what can grow.

Rena Romano: It grew and it was painful, and I remembered everything. But I suppressed the pain and I took myself out of the situation. It was as if I was above myself when it was happening because I just I froze.

Mike Domitrz: And what was the big shift

Mike Domitrz: You mentioned Oprah. What was the big shift for you? Because you were self medicating. You were numbing. What was the moment that changed it all?

Rena Romano: Watching her and one night I was suicidal, and it was to the point I was drinking a fifth of rum a night just to get drunk. I was numb, and I was tired of the pain and the shame and I didn't know how to live with it. And I was thinking of how I was going to kill myself. And then after a while I passed out and I woke up screaming, "I don't want to die. I just don't know how to live with this." And I remembered the crisis hotline. Because I didn't want to die. I just didn't know how to live with the pain or the shame of it, and I needed to be taught how to work through this and to get the resources and get the help that I needed, because I couldn't do it by myself.

Mike Domitrz: So for you, instead of attempting suicide it was place a phone call.

Rena Romano: Place a phone call, yeah.

Mike Domitrz: Which is so beautiful for everyone to hear. If you're in that moment and you're thinking about taking your life, pause and say, "I need to call. I need to call someone right now." And that could be a confidential source like you did, a

crisis line, or it could be somebody you feel safe to call and you'd rather call because you and I know, some people won't call an anonymous line, but they'll call a friend.

Rena Romano: Absolutely. And the friends, I encouraged them to watch my TEDx talk too, because I've had many friends say, "Wow, that really was a big eye opener for me on how to listen without interruption or judgment."

Mike Domitrz: Yes, because that's key. And without trying to be a counselor or therapist, because you're not one.

Rena Romano: And don't try to fix it, because you can't.

Mike Domitrz: That's right. It's that you just need to be present, and by not trying to fix it and not trying to to be a counselor or therapist, your mindset is, how do I get them or provide them the right resource, instead of trying to be the resource. And often as friends, we think we can be the resource. And here you can do grave harm trying to be the resource, because you could ask one question that you genuinely are trying to help, and you create blame that you did not mean to create and you just magnified the harm that was done.

Rena Romano: Exactly. So it's okay to say, "I'm not sure what to say or do other than let's find a resource for you to call."

Mike Domitrz: Yes.

Rena Romano: Because they're more equipped to handle it.

Mike Domitrz: Right. They're literally professionally trained for that phone call, where a friend is not going to be. And that phone call training is in depth. To be an advocate, you're talking, depending on the program you're talking about, 40 to 80 hours of training just for those phone calls, just for those moments. So it's very in depth training that it's required to be in depth to make sure there is no harm done, that it's a supportive experience. And that's what you're going to have when you call those services, those crisis centers, those lines that is so important. And Rena, through your journey, was there a champion of respect for you, a person in your life that as you came forward really was key is being there for you.

Rena Romano: My mother. She had no idea what was happening to me as a child. She was a full time worker. She went off to work, the 9:00 to 5:00 hard working woman. She thought that the people she entrusted us with were our protectors. They were our perpetrators. And she died with the guilt definitely, but she believed me. She helped me get help. There were my therapists, my other survivors who were in the group with me. Later meeting my husband, he was my biggest advocate in helping me and saying, "Okay, it's time to write your book, His Puppet No More. You might have a big revelation writing it." And he was wrong. I had many. It was so therapeutic to write that book.

Mike Domitrz: Oh, that's one thing that when people come up to me and say, "What's one thing you hear has helped people in addition to counseling, therapy?" Journaling. Writing. So many survivors have talked about just being able to write it out, what they were feeling, what they're thinking now then, just allows there to be a release. It once again takes it from inside to outside. Even though it's still your journal, it's outside you. And so that allows a release that is very powerful.

Rena Romano: Absolutely. And I had never journaled before, because I was afraid to put my thoughts and feelings down on paper until I started writing the book. So it was a big ... I typed out one sentence the day I started the book, and I spent the rest of the day crying for that little girl who had lost her innocence, because I had never started writing before that day. So it was very therapeutic.

Mike Domitrz: Well, and I think that's important for listeners to understand, is the first word can be the most difficult. Once you do it can start to flow because of that release. And that's so important for people to understand. And that you don't have to write something beautiful. When you look at writing and you learn how to just write as a writer, there's a phrase to write your shitty first draft, which the idea is, stop thinking about the quality of it and just write what's coming to mind. That will give you a freedom of thought, versus a self editorial, which then becomes critical and judgmental which is not healthy in this experience.

Rena Romano: Right. And I think I didn't start writing before then because it made it real.

Mike Domitrz: Yes, right.

Rena Romano: And I was still in denial. I didn't want it to be real. And that was a big aha moment for me, "Is it real, I have nothing to be ashamed of. I am proud of my courage and strength that I persevered." And going on Oprah even made it more real and I'm just determined to make it real. And they're using my TEDx Talk all over the world now for trauma centers.

Mike Domitrz: That's awesome. Rena, the inspiration, the courage that you have shared today and throughout your life on this journey is simply awesome. I want to thank you so much for sharing with us today.

Rena Romano: Thank you Michael. It's been a pleasure.

Mike Domitrz: And for our listeners, you know what's up next. That is question of the week. Before I answer this week's question of the week, I'd love to ask you a question. Would you please subscribe to this podcast, The RESPECT Podcast with Mike Domitrz. By subscribing you can make a huge impact. Now you might be wondering, "Mike, how does my subscribing to your podcast make a huge impact?" Well here's how, for every person that subscribes, it raises the rankings of the show in the search engines. So for people who care about respect like yourself, when they're doing a search for podcasts, they're more likely to find the show, thus providing an awesome opportunity for us to spread

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Mike Domitrz: It happens automatically. So subscribing also makes your life easier. Now let's get into this week's question of the week. Oh and by the way, you can always ask your questions of the week by joining us on Facebook and our discussion group. It's called The RESPECT Podcast Discussion Group. Go there on Facebook and ask whatever questions you would like me to answer and/or address in this segment of the show. And then listen to each episode to find out when your question is included. This week's question is, "Mike, what's one of the more difficult situations you've faced in all the work you've done for all these years?" And there's one that does come to my mind. And that is that frequently when we're doing this work survivors come forward afterwards and often it's the first time the survivor's ever come forward to say, 'I'm a survivor.' And that takes strength and it takes courage and it's wonderful and it's inspiring.

Mike Domitrz: And in this case a survivor came forward and it ended up going to a criminal case and it went to trial, and the person was found not guilty. That was tough. Because to see come forward and say, "Mike, I'm a survivor." And to take the courage and strength it takes to go through a trial, and then not get justice for that person, that was so difficult to watch. And here's the one light at the end of the tunnel that that survivor's strength and courage, that that is inspiring and that they got to have their voice heard. Of course we all wish that when survivors come forward that justice was also matching. At the same time we can recognize that even their voice being heard is so important, and the strength and the courage that takes. Do you know what I would love? I would love to hear your answer to this week's question of the week. So would you please answer what your answer would have been if you were asked that question today on the show.

Mike Domitrz: All you do is go to our Facebook page. We have a special group where we have these discussions called The RESPECT Podcast Discussion Group. So The RESPECT Podcast Discussion Group, and share with us what would your answer have been to this week's question of the week, and if take a moment, post us a new question for future episodes. What question would you like to hear me answer on an upcoming episode? That's all done on Facebook in our special group which is, The RESPECT Podcast Discussion Group. Can't wait to see you there. Thank you for joining us for this episode of The RESPECT Podcast, which was sponsored by the Date Safe Project at [datesafeproject.org](http://datesafeproject.org). And remember, you can always find me an [mikespeaks.com](http://mikespeaks.com).