

THE
STAND TALL
STUDY GUIDE
FOR YOUTH

AGES 10 AND UP

A GUIDE TO PROMOTE
INTERGENERATIONAL
DISCUSSION
BASED ON THE NOVEL
STAND TALL

*“An eloquent
story of
ordinary heroes. . .”*

KIRKUS REVIEWS

“It’s hard to imagine any ordinary young reader coming across a book by Joan Bauer and not feeling at least a little bit better about the world.”

CHARLES TAYLOR, THE NEW YORK TIMES

“A triumphant tale!”

PUBLISHER’S WEEKLY

BY CATHERINE HART WEBER, PH.D.

with CHRISTINE BLAIR AND JOAN BAUER



ntroduction

Most everyone feels some pressure in life. Stress can be difficult and hurtful, but you can learn to bounce back.

In fact, facing tough times can even help you change your life for the good.

You can learn how to handle life's pressures by observing positive people, and by understanding how your thoughts and actions can help you deal with difficult feelings.

The book *Stand Tall* and this study guide can help you learn, think, and talk with others about hard times as you see how a boy named Tree learns and grows in his life. The story can also help you think about how you can bounce back and grow from the challenges you face.

[Here are some of the things you'll think about and discuss:](#)

week 1

What can we learn from a tree?

What do seasons teach us?

Growing through change

week 2

dis-Ability (Living with it—thinking about our differences)

What's your motto? (What we want our lives to be about)

Divorce (the pain, the reality, and how to face it)

week 3

Standing tall (how to talk about war and terrorism)

Let the sadness come (how to grieve your losses)

Saying goodbye

Finding meaning and purpose in tough times

Here's how to get ready:

- Either read the book *Stand Tall* or listen to the audiotape—sticking with it all the way through. You can buy these on-line or in the book-store.
- Be sure to have a journal or a notepad and a pencil or pen so you can write the answers and your ideas.
- Most importantly, as you read and go through the questions, be open to how you can learn from the story and become a better person.

Let's begin together.

Catherine Hart Weber, Ph.D.

Family and Marriage Therapist

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week 1

Read Chapters 1-7

A good way to start your group study is to have someone read the following out loud:

If you could make one thing in your life disappear, what would it be?

- a. Homework
- b. Housework
- c. Vegetables
- d. One of your weird relatives
- e. All your problems (HINT: this has been known to include all of the above)

If you're like most people, you picked **e**. Unfortunately, problems, like certain weird relatives, never really go away. It's a fact of life. But the good news about problems is that when we face them, they can help us become stronger, wiser people.

As you read *Stand Tall* you'll meet a very tall twelve-year-old boy named Tree who is facing change, problems, loss, and confusion all at once.

His family is, too. So are some of his friends.

Sometimes reading a book about someone who is working through problems can help you think about your own life. Do you know why? It's because people are born storytellers. We tell about our lives by telling the stories of what has happened to us and to others. In your family or with your friends, you might have special stories or memories that you tell over and over. These stories become part of your history together. They help you to understand where you've come from.

There are two things you can count on when you read *Stand Tall* with one or more of your family members or as a group study.

- Everyone will react a little differently to the story.
- You will laugh.

What can we learn from a tree?

Being a tree is the best thing going in the plant world.

It's easy to take trees for granted. They're all around you—but how they grow holds an important secret to life. No matter how big a tree is (and there are some enormous ones like the California Redwoods that are over two hundred feet tall) a big part of a tree's life happens underneath the surface. That's where the roots grow. Roots pull nutrients from the soil to help the tree grow strong.

That's how it is with people, too.

There's a part of you that everyone can see—how tall you are, what color hair you have, etc. But a big part of who you are takes place beneath the surface in your heart and mind.

Think about the connections:

A tree produces leaves and fruit.

You produce through gifts and talents.

A tree needs good nutrients from the soil to help it grow.

You need good nutrients, too, like food, rest, love, trust, and kindness.

A tree's roots grow deeper during drought and storms.

You can face hard, challenging times, but actually grow stronger.

Are you facing any challenges now?

TALK TOGETHER

1. Grandpa and Tree are facing hard, challenging times, but letting their roots grow deeper. What are they facing? How are they growing stronger?
2. Describe something in your life right now that is causing you to grow deeper roots.
3. Tree's nickname is hard for him in the beginning, but he learns good things from it, too. What does he learn?

GO DEEPER

How are you unique? Write about this in your journal or draw a picture.

Have you ever had a nickname? Write it down and include how you feel about it. Can you draw a picture that shows how you feel about that name?

TAKE ACTION

Nicknames can be powerful labels. We all need to be sensitive to what we call others. Is there someone you know who has been hurt by name calling? Is there a way you can reach out to him or her?





What do seasons teach us?

To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose unto heaven...

The earth speaks without words, but your eyes and senses tell you what season it is.



In spring—new buds appear.

In summer—comes the hottest weather.

In autumn—leaves turn color and fall from the trees.

In winter—many places get snow and ice.

*Change is loss and
gain at the same time.*

Your life has seasons, too: childhood, young adult, middle-age, senior citizen. With each season there are times of joy and of difficulty.

One of the **KEYS TO HAPPINESS** is to learn to enjoy the journey of life whatever season you're in.

Grandpa did this by finding the positives in his challenges and concentrating on what he had rather than what he'd lost: "I've got every part of my body working except below my right knee. I've got a decent mind, a big-time stubborn streak, and a world-class grandson." He had a good sense of humor, too, even when times were hard.

TALK TOGETHER

1. Is there a situation in your life where you'd like to be more positive?
2. What are some positive things in your life right now?
3. Do you know anyone who has a wonderful sense of humor? What is it like to be around him or her?

GO DEEPER

What makes you happy? Write about this in your journal or draw a picture.

TAKE ACTION

LAUGH TOGETHER!

Try laughing out loud for as long as you can with another member of your family or group. You don't need something funny to happen first—just start laughing. Use a stopwatch--who laughed the longest? Don't skip this one—it's fun!

Growing through change

It takes time to get used to all the changes.

Change is exciting, scary, confusing, awful, weird, necessary....

Change is part of life, but adjusting to change doesn't always happen overnight. Even new shoes take time to break in. Tree's mom is trying to help her sons adapt to the changes brought about by the divorce, but they way she does it, though heymom.com, makes them feel uncomfortable. Dad tries to explain how hard it is to get used to the divorce: "All this change, Tree, is kind of like trying to bat left-handed when you've been a righty all your life."



notes

Bouncing Back

from Stress

Why is it that some people can go through really tough times and still bounce back?

They've learned to adapt by using the skills of resilience.

Resilience helps you recover from life's hardest blows.

Here are some tips to help you learn to be resilient.

- Have friends and be a friend. Get help and support from your friends and family. Help somebody else in need.*

- Believe in yourself and what you know you can do. Nurture a positive view of yourself.*

- Take charge of your behavior and actions. Set goals for yourself and move toward them one small step at a time, one day at a time.*

- Take good care of yourself. Exercise, eat healthy food, and get lots of sleep.*

- Be hopeful. Try not to worry—worry opens the door to fear. Expect that good things will happen.*

TALK TOGETHER

- 1.What else is change like? Think of some examples. Change is like...cleaning your room... diapering a baby . . .
2. Share about a change in your life that you've had to adjust to. How long did it take you to adjust? Why do adjustments to change take time?

GO DEEPER

When has change been good for you? Write about this in your journal or draw it as a picture.

TAKE ACTION

If you're going through a difficult change now, share this with someone you trust and ask for support. Can you think of a way to support someone you know who is going through a change?

LEARN MORE

Change is complicated. It's natural to want to keep things just as they are—it feels safe and secure when life doesn't change. But change helps you to grow-- right in the middle of the struggle you can be building confidence and strength of character. Still, when you experience loss, you need to talk about it with someone you trust. Tree could always talk to Grandpa—their relationship was built on trust. Learning to change and grow in the little things makes you more ready to face the big things when they come.

Week 2

Read Chapters 8-18

dis-Ability

Think about everything you do each day, then think about doing it with a disability.

With these words, physical therapist Mona Arnold tells Tree how to best help his grandpa recover. Is there something about your body that makes you feel different? Losing a leg, arm, or any function of your body can be a life-long challenge. People can be different from others in many ways. Tree was hugely tall for his age. Sophie always spoke the truth, but not everyone appreciated it. Sully Devo had a hearing aid. A divorce can make a family feel different.

TALK ABOUT IT

1. Do you think Tree sees his height as a disability? Why? How do you think he feels about his lack of athletic ability?
2. Tree is a big help to Grandpa in his recovery. What did you learn about Tree from the way he helps? What did you learn about Grandpa?
3. Tree reaches out to Sophie when she is being picked on because he knows what it is like to be teased. Have you ever done that for someone or had someone do that for you?

4. Are you unique or different from others in any particular way?

GO DEEPER

Think about the things that you are thankful for. Make a list of them in your journal or draw them as a picture.

TAKE ACTION

Write or eat with your other hand, hop on one leg, wear a blindfold, or put ear plugs in your ears. What's it like to face such challenges?



What's your motto?

Treat people the way you want to be treated.

Speak your mind and ride a fast horse.

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.

A motto is a phrase or sentence that communicates a guiding principle. Most countries, businesses, schools, and institutions have mottos. Many people do, too.

TALK ABOUT IT

1. What does Sophie's motto, "Speak your mind and ride a fast horse" mean? How does that fit her?
2. Does your school have a motto? Your city? Your country? Find out.
3. Tree thinks up a motto for himself and one for the dinosaurs. What are they? Do they fit?
4. How do you want to be treated?

GO DEEPER

Alone or together with your family or group, develop a motto. Think of something that captures who you are, who you would like to be, or an idea you want to represent.

TAKE ACTION

Write that motto down, design it on a computer, or illustrate it to make it special. Read it daily for a week and try to do something each day to make it a reality.

Divorce

Divorce casts so many shadows.

Divorce involves change and getting used to change takes time. Tree and his brothers experience a wide range of feelings about divorce.

Tree feels disoriented moving from his father's house to his mother's house. He longs for the way it used to be.

The family feels sad and can't always express their feelings in words.

The brothers are irritable and don't want to do much. Larry has begun drinking to block the pain.

Tree sometimes feels scared and sick at night for no reason.

All of these feelings are normal. If you are going through a divorce or have experienced one, talk with someone you trust who can help you to sort through your thoughts and feelings.

TALK TOGETHER

1. Do you think divorce is like a war and can have a lasting effect on people?
2. Divorce is different for every family. How does Sophie's family deal with divorce compared to Tree's family?
3. Mom develops a website, heymom.com, to stay in touch with her sons. Do you think it helped? What else could she do to stay in touch?
4. Do you know anyone close to you who is going through a divorce? How can you be supportive?

GO DEEPER

Has your family gone through a divorce? How has that affected you? Write about this in your journal or draw a picture of your feelings.

week 3

Read Chapters 19 to the end

WAR PEACE **HONOR HEROES** TERRORISM LOSS OVERCOMING

Standing Tall

They marched. Not for themselves. They marched to remember the ones who didn't make it back. They marched because seeing so much loss can teach you about life. They marched because we're all fighting a war whether we know it or not—a war for our minds and souls and what we believe in.

Stand Tall is a story that talks about the lessons and the memories of war.

War has been much in the news these days.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 were considered an act of war.

Many countries are fighting an ongoing war on terrorism.

The Iraq War and its aftermath made headlines every day. There will probably be other wars.

Everyone has different feelings about war. Some people feel that in certain cases war is justified. Others do not. Most recently during the Iraq War, many people took to the streets to protest this war. War protests happened during the Vietnam War, too. In Chapter Five Tree gives a report about war including both his and Grandpa's feelings about it. You might want to read this section out loud in your group.



A war is an intense struggle. The metaphor of war is woven throughout *Stand Tall* as the characters struggle against the challenges and difficulties set before them.

TALK TOGETHER

1. Discuss your thoughts and feelings about war. Do you think it has a purpose?
2. Vietnam, the war Grandpa fought in, was a different kind of war because people could see it on their TV screens. Now we are living with a war on terrorism. How is this war different?
3. What are some of the battles that the characters in *Stand Tall* are fighting?
4. Are you fighting any battles right now?

GO DEEPER

If you are battling something right now, where can you find strength so that you don't have to fight alone? Who or what can help you? Write about this in your journal or draw a picture of it.



TAKE ACTION

- How has 911 affected you?

The terrorist attacks of September 11 have made many people more afraid and anxious. The fight against fear is an important battle to enter. You win it in your mind and heart. Living with courage doesn't mean you're never afraid. It means you don't let fear be the final word. You make a decision every day to find the good in life and to focus on that. You make a decision to choose hope in your heart and to see the signs of hope around you. This takes practice, but it's worth the battle. Remember Grandpa. While facing has many opportunities to choose fear, but instead he grabs onto hope, laughter, and courage.

****If you have experienced a deep personal loss, the next section on grieving and healing should be helpful.**

- Talk to someone who has fought in a war.
- Honor heroes: What makes someone a hero? Many brave men, women, and children have been called heroes for their courage and kindness. Honor them especially on days of remembrance like Memorial Day, July 4th, Veterans Day, and September 11th.
- Do you have any heroes in your life? How do they inspire you?

Let the sadness come

It's tough around here, I know. We've all lost a piece of ourselves. War does that—it blows things up and leaves an empty place where something important used to be.

There are two kinds of losses. The ones you can see (like the loss of Grandpa's leg, his friends who died in the war, the houses ruined in the flood) and the ones you can't see, like ideas (what a home is), or feelings of security and belonging (not having everything you care about under one roof).

Whether you lose things you can see or things you can't, it's important to let yourself feel the sadness. This process is called grieving. Losses that you can't see are sometimes the hardest to understand

because they aren't always obvious. Grieving, like change, takes time. You can feel shock at what you've lost, or "phantom pain" like Grandpa experiences. Although his leg is gone, at times he still feels like it is there. You can wish for things to be the way they once were. You can get disorganized for a while (although for some of us being disorganized is normal!) You can lose interest in things you used to care about.

All of these are normal stages that people pass through when grieving a loss. The damage to Tree's father's house after the flood is huge. The brothers are shocked, angered, and then grieve the loss of their home and many of their belongings, but with Grandpa's help, they begin to do something about the loss. They begin to rebuild. What a difference that makes.

TALK TOGETHER

1. What does Tree find worth restoring in the sewage and muck of the basement?
2. How does restoring his brothers' awards help Larry and Curtis? How does it help Tree?
3. Every character in the story has a different way of coping with pain and loss. Think of a few characters and compare them. *When life gets tough, Tree's mother gets _____.* Who says, "*Let me tinker around here, or I'll get so bored, I'll start taking this hospital apart piece by piece.*" Who first tells Tree, "*You've gotta laugh. If you don't, you'll cry.*"
4. Helping others is an important theme in *Stand Tall*. Tree makes friends with Sophie after the eighth grade girls are mean to her. The Vietnam vets bring Christmas to the children's hospital. What are some other examples in the book?
5. Sophie experiences a different kind of loss at school when the garbage is put by her locker. What kind of loss is that, and how does she deal with it?

GO DEEPER

Everyone experiences loss differently. Are you experiencing a loss right now? Write about it in your journal or draw a picture of what you're feeling.

Saying goodbye

We light this candle of hope to help us remember that hope can always be with us. We light this candle to thank God for helping us through the flood.

Memorials, ceremonies, and symbols help people remember and pass through the grieving process. When Tree visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, he understands it's a place that helps people deal with loss. He wishes there could be a memorial wall for divorce.

There are many memorials at Ground Zero where people have placed flowers, pictures, and personal items to help them mourn their loved ones who died in the terrorist attack.

What helps us through loss? Love, laughter, helping others, a good attitude, allowing ourselves to grieve, expressing our feelings, prayer . . .





TALK TOGETHER

1. Can you think of a ceremony or memorial that could help Tree in grieving the loss of his parents' marriage? Would there be one that could help the whole family?
2. How did you feel when Bradley rose up on the vet's table, saved by the cat?
3. Tree hopes his parents will get back together, but they don't. What helps him accept that?
4. What has helped you accept loss?

GO DEEPER

Have you experienced a recent loss? Are you still getting over it? Write about what you've learned in this study that could be helpful to you now. If you feel stuck, talk to someone you trust or consider finding a professional therapist to help you through.

TAKE ACTION

WELCOME HOME, FOLKS

WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT

This sign put up by the Vietnam vets after the flood brings hope and encouragement to the town.

Do you need to hang a sign anywhere for yourself, your family, or someone else?

LEARN MORE

Facts to think about:

Love can increase your immune system by 400%.

Laughter can help heal your mind and body.

Exercise helps you fight stress.

*The best way to cheer yourself up,
is to cheer somebody else up.”*

Mark Twain

Finding meaning and purpose in difficult times

It's going to be a long night, folks. Whatever you've learned about getting through hard times, I hope you'll share it with the people around you.

Have you ever thought about why you're on this earth? Why do you have the gifts and talents you've been given? Why have you gone through the experiences that have shaped your life? Every person has a purpose. Every person has immeasurable value.

Tree finds purpose in the middle of the fear, danger, and uncertainty of the flood. He helps save animals and his father speaks words of encouragement to him that mean so much:

I don't think I've told you how much help you've been with Grandpa. I don't know what I would have done without you.

I told your mom how well you've been handling all this, how you're helping out everywhere. I told her I was so proud of you, I could bust.

We all need encouragement, especially when times are hard. Encouragement is a gift we can all give. Is there someone you know who needs encouragement?

GO DEEPER

Think about your purpose.

What gives you hope and purpose for living? Write about this in your journal or draw a picture of it.

Everything has a purpose, really—you just have to look for it.

Cats are good at keeping old dogs alive.

Loss helps you reach for gain.

Death helps you celebrate life.

War helps you work for peace.

A flood makes you glad you're still standing.

And a tall boy can stop the wind so a candle of hope can burn bright.

TALK TOGETHER

How can you keep hope burning bright?

What are the signs of hope around you?

Thank you for taking part in this study. We would love to hear from you.

Contact us at letters@joanbauer.com



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Joan Bauer

Joan Bauer is the author of seven novels for young people — *Stand Tall, Hope Was Here, Rules of the Road, Squashed, Thwonk, Backwater, and Sticks*. Her books have won numerous awards, among them the Newbery Honor Medal, the Christopher Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and the Golden Kite Award of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.