

Reclaiming My Identity
Participant Manual

RECLAIMING MY IDENTITY

PARTICIPANT MANUAL

ROB FISCHER

Reclaiming My Identity Participant Manual

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FOREWORD

I'll be honest with you. This men's curriculum was especially difficult for me to write. Sexual abuse is such an evil, insidious offense, often leaving the victim with trauma and a secret that haunts them for the rest of their life.

Sexual abuse against girls and women disturbs good men to the core, because we want to protect them and keep them from harm. I know this first-hand because our little girl was sexually molested by two male babysitters when she was four years old.

My wife and I returned home that night, paid the babysitters and I drove them home. But when I got back, my wife and two young children were still awake and deep in a serious conversation. I knew immediately that something was seriously wrong.

That night we discovered that these two teen boys had sexually molested our little girl. I was angry and disgusted! Those two male babysitters were the sons of one my co-workers whom I knew and trusted. They had often watched our young children. I had overwhelming feelings of hurt on behalf of our young daughter. Even back then, I wondered how this trauma would impact her life.

Despite the lateness of the hour, I immediately called my co-worker, the father of the two boys, and told him I had to speak with him face-to-face

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that night, even though it was already about 10:30pm. I drove back across town and met with the boys' dad in my car, describing to him what his boys had done to our daughter. He was a man of honor, he believed me, and was ashamed and horrified by his boys' behavior.

He called his boys to face me and I asked them whether they had molested my daughter. Knowing they had been caught, they admitted their guilt. Their dad then imposed disciplinary consequences on them, and I told them that we could no longer trust them with our children. Today, our daughter is grown, has healed from her past sexual abuse and has a family of her own.

But many of the stories of sexual abuse I've listened to have not ended so well. Having served as a pastor for 25 years, I've listened to the stories of many men and women who have suffered sexual abuse or assault. As a husband, father and grandfather my heart goes out especially to women who have been abused and victimized in this way.

Sexual abuse against boys and men is equally disturbing and destructive. And in my experience, boys and men process sexual abuse somewhat differently than women. To begin with, sexual abuse is nearly always a secret crime. It occurs in secret and often the abuser threatens the child should the child reveal what happened.

Sexual abuse almost always brings shame and guilt on the victim. As we'll see, this shame and guilt is misplaced, for the victim is never responsible for what the abuser did. But for boys and men, the shame is compounded because being sexually violated is an attack on our very manhood. Sexual abuse is rarely only about sex but about power and control. When a boy or man is subdued by another man or woman sexually, he may feel like he has lost his identity and for some his manhood.

For this reason, I want to commend you for your courage and boldness in choosing to be a part of this *Reclaiming My Identity* men's group. The

FOREWORD

power of the shame you feel is in its secrecy. Expose the secret and the shame will slowly disappear.

Since its inception, I've served on the board of directors for SAVAnon (Sexual Abuse Victims Anonymous). As a professional writer the board asked me to write the curriculum for SAVAnon. In the process, I interviewed the men whose stories are included in this book. Most of these men I know very well, and I've shared in the pain of their experiences.

I've been married to the same woman, Linda, for over 45 years. We have three children, lost a fourth through miscarriage, and have ten wonderful grandchildren. I am passionate about helping men and women who have suffered sexual abuse or assault on their journey toward healing.

We invite you to fully enter into this curriculum and the eight sessions you'll spend with other men like yourself. All sessions are gender specific. I'm sure you'll meet some wonderful people and make some life-long friends in your SAVAnon group.

Our hope and desire is that you will experience a good measure of healing and new-found hope through this curriculum!

— *Rob Fischer, January 2020*

SESSION ONE

PREPARATION

WELCOME AND REVIEW GROUP NORMS

_____ and _____ will be your facilitators for the next eight weeks. You are very courageous for taking this step toward processing the sexual abuse or sexual assault that you've experienced. We're glad you're here.

INTRODUCTIONS

- Name
- Whatever you'd like to share with us briefly to help us get to know you
- What would you like to take away from your experience over the next eight weeks?

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Over the Next Eight Weeks, We Will Talk About

- Your story of sexual abuse or assault
- How those experiences may have affected you
- Ways you may have coped with the abuse or assault
- Your relationships
- Common emotions and reactions surrounding sexual abuse and sexual assault
- God & faith
- Healing & forgiveness

ESTABLISH GROUP NORMS

We like to establish group norms or ground rules by which we agree to conduct our meetings together. This way we all have the same expectations and can get the most from this experience. Some group norms we see as essential are:

- **Keep confidences**—What we say here stays here. We pledge to keep confidences and ask the same of each member of the group.
- **Be present and ready**—Attend all the sessions (except in an emergency). Your presence here is not only important for you, but for the other participants as well. Being present includes keeping up with the light reading or homework between sessions.
- **Be respectful**—We agree to respect each other: our individual situations, our ethnicity, our faiths, the choices we've made, the things we may say, and how we each process the sexual abuse or assault we experienced.

FACILITATOR GUIDE

- **Function as a team**—We agree to function as a team: no one dominates the conversation; we listen to each other; we're here to assist, encourage and care for each other
- **Be humble**—We're not here to judge or fix each other. Sometimes the way we suppress our own need is by comparing ourselves to someone else or trying to fix them. Also, don't compare your experiences with those of the other men in your group. Let each man's experience stand on its own.
- **Believe and trust one another**—Some of the experiences shared in the curriculum and in our group may sound too horrible or too strange to be true. All the stories printed in this curriculum are factual.
- **"Check-ins"**—Allowing each other to check-in and ensure we're okay through any pain the healing process may prompt.
- **No "over-sharing hangovers"**—promise not to regret what we've shared with each other.
- **Always end on a positive note.**
- **What else** would you like to set down as a group norm?

INTRODUCTION – RECLAIMING MY IDENTITY

Welcome! We are so glad you've chosen to join us for this eight-week experience designed to help you heal from the sexual abuse that you have experienced. We are so sorry for what was done to you and for the pain and suffering you've gone through as a result of the abuse. We want to provide a safe, caring environment as you participate with this small group of men.

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All the facilitators or group leaders come with their own stories of sexual abuse or assault and are in various stages of healing. Your facilitators are volunteers and do not receive payment for leading a group.

We recognize that although there are some basic issues that we all experience, or need to face, each man processes his experiences of sexual abuse in a different way. Some express the need for healing and others do not. We also recognize that your story is unique. But we know we can learn from each other and help each other through the things we've experienced as we share with each other.

Whatever it is you seek in response to the sexual abuse or assault that you experienced, some sort of change is inevitable. Change can be difficult and scary but necessary if we want to experience different outcomes than we're currently experiencing. Please avail yourself of every method and opportunity that we provide to help facilitate your desired change.

As a legal entity, SAVAnon is an affiliation of Abortion Anonymous, Inc. (AbAnon), an independent organization, unaffiliated with any particular organized religion, denomination or faith. SAVAnon exists to provide awareness regarding the serious harm caused by sexual abuse and offers a path to healing for those who have been abused. Anyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, faith or lack thereof, who has experienced sexual abuse or assault, is welcome to our gender-specific programs.

However, like so many organizations, universities and businesses, AbAnon and SAVAnon were built on the foundation and operate under Judeo-Christian values. We freely acknowledge that part of our eight-week program involves discussion about God, faith and forgiveness. Sexual abuse and assault impact the whole person: physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, and spiritually. Thousands of people have found change and healing through faith and SAVAnon would be remiss in our responsibility if we failed to include God and faith in our curriculum. However, in order to make every participant feel welcome and

SESSION ONE

comfortable regardless of their beliefs, our meetings will not include group prayer.

Some of what we'll be discussing together will be inherently difficult to discuss, but remember, you're not alone, we're all in this together.

Also, please be aware that as you read the men's stories of abuse contained in this manual and as you hear each other's stories, these may churn up old or repressed memories. You may find this experience very painful and distasteful, but some pain is necessary for healing. So please continue with us and share with us what you're feeling as you are able.

DISCLAIMER

We recognize that every person is different and your situations unique. Working through issues surrounding the sexual abuse or assault that you experienced usually occurs in layers over time. Our sincere hope is that you will experience some measure of healing through this eight-week experience.

Our facilitators and co-facilitators are not professional counselors or life coaches. They are volunteers with their own stories of sexual abuse or assault and have experienced significant healing from those experiences. The facilitators are passionate about providing a safe, supportive environment for you.

Any profits from the sale of the Participant Manuals go to cover the cost of printing, shipping and the support and expansion of SAVAnon, Inc. (Sexual Abuse Victims Anonymous) is a registered, 501c3 not-for-profit organization and is financed primarily through the generous contributions of donors.

If you have recently experienced sexual abuse or assault and have not yet reported it, please contact your local police department or other

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appropriate agency. The person who sexually abused you may be abusing others too.

If you are actively harming yourself or having suicidal thoughts, please seek the help of a professional counselor immediately. We can discretely help you locate a counselor if you like. This workshop is not intended to replace professional counseling or therapy.

HOW THE PARTICIPANT MANUAL WORKS

Each week or session has pre-work that you will complete prior to the next session. For instance, if you turn to Session Two in your Participant Manual, you'll see that it begins with Jim's Story, followed by some discussion questions and then a short reading.

Most of the sessions also contain projects. Please do this homework early in the week so that you're not scrambling at the last minute to finish. Take your time and seek to gain all you can from this experience. The more you invest, the more you'll take away.

SEXUAL ABUSE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

We are here to acknowledge and empathize with you as you process the sexual abuse or assault that you experienced. You are not alone. "According to childtrauma.org, in the U.S., one out of three females and one out of five males have been victims of sexual abuse before the age of 18 years."¹ And in some parts of the country, these rates are much higher.

In fact, RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network) indicates that "Every eight minutes, a child is sexually assaulted in the U.S.,² and 93 percent know the perpetrator.³ Many perpetrators of sexual abuse are in a position of trust or responsible for the child's care, such as a family member, teacher, clergy member, or coach."⁴

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“From 2009-2013, Child Protective Services agencies substantiated, or found strong evidence to indicate that 63,000 children a year were victims of sexual abuse.”⁵ While these numbers are staggering, they don't begin to tell the sad stories of these little ones whose childhood has been ripped from them.

On average, 321,500 people experience rape or sexual assault each year in the U.S.⁶ Nine out of ten of those victims are females. This translates to one out of every six American women who have experienced rape or attempted rape in her lifetime.⁷ Again, these numbers are shocking and such violence should never occur. Also, because sexual abuse is such a secret offense, much of it is never reported.

SEXUAL ABUSE/ASSAULT DEFINED

“Sexual abuse/assault is any form of sexual violence, including rape, child molestation, incest, and similar forms of non-consensual sexual contact. Most sexual abuse experts agree sexual abuse is never only about sex. Instead, it is often an attempt to gain power over others.”⁸

Child sexual abuse is not confined solely to sexual intercourse but extends to fondling, inappropriate touching, sexual display or inappropriate sexual comments in front of a child, or photographic exploitation of a child. Voyeurism, or watching a child undress or shower also constitutes sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse of children is all-too common in the US:⁹

- 44% of all sexual abuse/assault victims are under the age of 18
- Most child sexual abuse occurs between the ages of 7 and 13
- 20% of children who experience sexual abuse are under the age of 8

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- Up to 93% of sexually abused children know their attackers well and over one third are family members
- Most child sexual abuse does not get reported until years afterward, if ever

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Sexual exploitation refers to the sexual abuse of children or minors involving the exchange of sex or sexual acts for drugs, food, shelter, money, protection, or other basic needs of life. Sexual exploitation includes involving children or youth in creating pornographic and sexually explicit websites.¹⁰

Childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault and sexual exploitation all constitute abuse. Therefore, for the sake of brevity we will use the general term “sexual abuse” throughout the remainder of this manual.

THE TRAUMA OF SEXUAL ABUSE

When a child experiences sexual abuse, they may not immediately understand what is happening to them. Feelings of shame and fear may prevent them from telling someone they trust what happened to them. Often, if they do tell an adult, they may not believe the child or in some cases, simply dismiss the abuse due to their own fear or other reasons, however flimsy they may be. A child may also feel a tremendous sense of loss, for which they cannot properly account.

Victims of sexual abuse often express feeling violated and that their bodies no longer belong to them. Victims often report feeling shame, terror, and guilt, blaming themselves for the abuse. Sexual abuse may have also left the victim injured physically.

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Sexual abuse causes lifelong damage to the individual with symptoms that are varied and universally common. Victims feel a deep sense of sexual shame, depression, anxiety, worthlessness, guilt, and difficulties with careers and relationships.¹¹

Many victims of sexual abuse or sexual assault experience feelings of:

- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Despair
- Guilt
- Shame
- That something is fundamentally wrong with them
- Personal responsibility for the abuse or assault
- Fear
- Worthlessness, unworthiness, or dirtiness
- Difficulties with intimacy and trust
- Anger
- Personality disruptions
- Attachment issues
- Sexual dysfunction and fertility issues
- Chronic pain

If not dealt with, the trauma associated with sexual abuse can result in PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), depression and anxiety that could last a lifetime.¹² Some of the possible symptoms of PTSD resulting from child abuse include:^{13, 14}

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- Suicidal tendencies
- Withdrawal from and mistrust or fear of adults and authority figures
- Hypersexuality and promiscuity
- Avoidance of sex and physical touch
- Problems with sleep or fear of going to bed
- Nightmares and/or flashbacks
- Self-harm
- Addictions to drugs, alcohol, or food
- Unusual sexual behavior
- Homosexual or lesbian lifestyle
- Prostitution
- Depression
- Sexually abusing other children (35% of child sexual abusers were abused themselves as children.)
- Phantom pain

REPPRESSED MEMORIES, DISSOCIATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

Dr. Jim Hopper is a clinical psychologist with expertise in psychological trauma due to child abuse and sexual assault. Dr. Hopper explains that it is common for those who were sexually abused as children “to go for many years, even decades, without having (recognizable or explicit) memories of the abuse.”¹⁵ They may experience emotional or physiological responses triggered by something associated with the abuse, but they may not comprehend why.

SESSION ONE

With instances of childhood sexual abuse, a child's brain often represses the memory of the trauma as a defense mechanism that allows the child to continue to function despite the abuse.

Dissociation is another defense mechanism in which the trauma was so horrific that the brain assigns those incidents to alter-personalities so that the individual may continue to function on some level of normalcy. Although some of the men's stories in this manual refer to repression or dissociation, these issues may require further assistance from a trained therapist who is proficient in those areas.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Some of you may be thinking, "I've been trying to put my sexual abuse behind me for years. Why would I want to revisit that experience again? I just want to put it behind me and forget about it." Others may be processing their abuse in a different way that's difficult to describe at this time. That's okay.

In the following seven weeks of *Reclaiming My Identity*, we want to join with you in processing the pain of your experience. We'll provide you with tools and strategies for doing so. We want to help you find answers, support you, and offer you hope. Many men find tremendous relief in discovering they are not alone, and that healing and regaining their dignity, identity, and love for life is possible.

FACILITATOR STORY DEBRIEF

1. How did you feel about your facilitator's story?
2. In what ways did you find it helpful?

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CLOSING

1. Each week at the end of our session, we want to end on a positive note. Some of you might be thinking right now, “This was really hard!” Or, “I didn’t want to come.” So, where is all the hope in this? Why are we doing this? How can we end tonight in a positive way?
2. Is there anything else you’d like to bring up to the group tonight?
3. In what ways can we support you this week?

LOGISTICS

We’ll meet here each week for seven more weeks at _____ (time).

SESSION ONE

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please complete the following tasks outlined below before our next session.

1. Self-assessment. Please take a few minutes and go over the two lists of symptoms found in this chapter. Check any of those symptoms that you have experienced in the past or are experiencing now.
2. Please read Session Two: Jenny's story and the Healing Action. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week.
3. For a list of helpful resources including 24/7 hotlines visit ***www.savanon/resources.org***.

Thank you for coming!

SESSION TWO

The real freedom we seek is often found in the vulnerability of the secrets we least desire to talk about.

– Lee Hudson

WELCOME

- **Keep confidences**—What we say here stays here. We pledge to keep confidences and ask the same of each member of the group.
- **Be present and ready**—Attend all the sessions (except in an emergency). Your presence here is not only important for you, but for the other participants as well. Being present includes keeping up with the light reading or homework between sessions.
- **Be respectful**—We agree to respect each other: our individual situations, our ethnicity, our faiths, the choices we've made, the things we may say, and how we each process the sexual abuse we experienced.

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- **Function as a team**—We agree to function as a team: no one dominates the conversation; we listen to each other; we're here to assist, encourage and care for each other
- **Be humble**—We're not here to judge or *fix* each other. Sometimes the way we suppress our own need is by comparing ourselves to someone else or trying to fix them. Also, don't compare your experiences with those of the other men in your group. Let each man's experience stand on its own.
- **Believe and trust one another**—Some of the experiences shared in the curriculum and in our group may sound too horrible or too weird to be true. All the stories printed in this curriculum are factual.
- **"Check-ins"**—Allowing each other to check-in and ensure we're okay through any pain the healing process may prompt.
- **No "over-sharing hangovers"**—promise not to regret what we've shared with each other.
- **Always end on a positive note.**
- **What else?**

JIM'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

My mom divorced my biological dad when I was seven years old and in the first grade. My mom soon remarried a much older man. My stepdad introduced odd practices into the family. One such practice was "fondue nights," in which he had us sitting around eating fondue naked. This included my stepdad, my mom, my sister (who was a few years older than I) and me.

SESSION TWO

My stepdad's preoccupation with sex escalated to having my sister and me touch each other and forcing me to watch Mom and Dad have intercourse, while making me stand by naked. When I was about 12, they had me watching them in this way and I had an erection. My stepdad asked if I wanted to climb on top of my mom and then he laughed, making my mom mad at him. His behavior disgusted me.

When I was in junior high, we moved to a remote ranch and my stepdad's attention turned toward my sister. He would watch her through her window and touched her inappropriately. She had a relationship with a boy in junior high, which made my stepdad jealous.

So, my sister moved out to live with my aunt and uncle. She claimed that our stepdad had raped her. My mom and grandparents all knew about it, but they never reported him.

Then, when I was in high school, I was the only child in the home. When I brought girls home with me, he would say inappropriate things to them. One time he touched one of my girlfriends inappropriately. I confronted him about it and got so angry that I began choking him. Fortunately, I stopped and felt remorseful about my actions later. But he was never called to account for his behavior.

I stayed away from home for a few days after that incident. But when I finally returned home, my mom told me, "If you want to live in this home, you'll have to live by our rules." So, I moved out that day and into an apartment with my future wife.

At 17, I decided to join the Navy but needed my mom's approval and signature to do so. I had done everything to stay away from my mom and stepdad, but she complied. I was so bitter toward her and my stepdad that when I was on leave from the Navy, I would visit my girlfriend but not my mother.

One day I was in the barracks in San Diego and a Navy soldier came to my room asking if I would like to go to a Bible study. I decided to attend and

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started attending his church as well. And when my girlfriend came to town to visit, she would go to church with me too. We got married at 19.

At least twice during that time, older men in the church pulled me aside and confronted me about the way I treated my wife and said inappropriate things to her in public. I remember lashing back at one gentleman, "Who the hell do you think you are to tell me what to do?" I had no idea how to have a healthy relationship. But today I consider myself fortunate to have had godly men in my life at this time who called me out on my behavior.

My wife had been raped as a young girl and so she brought her own issues into our marriage as a result of her sexual abuse. For my part, I felt guilty over my past and the things my stepdad had forced me to do. It wasn't until more than 45 years later during a counseling session that I was able to label my stepdad's treatment of me as sexual abuse.

I know now that the sexual abuse has affected my life and marriage profoundly. I would always avoid conflicts but would let the pressure build up inside me until I would explode inappropriately. Also, I have been very guarded in all my relationships—even in marriage—unable to give myself to others. I would stuff and stifle things.

Twice early on in my marriage I had extramarital affairs. Neither my wife nor I have experienced life to its fullest as a result of sexual abuse and the twisted behaviors we learned as a result.

Now, for the first time, we're talking about our sexual abuse and attempting to take measures to heal from it and the garbage it has brought into our lives and marriage.

My stepfather died before I really had a chance to reconcile our differences. I don't have thoughts of anger, or of forgiveness. It just was... and I've moved on. But forgiveness played a crucial role in my relationship with my mother who had been part of the abuse back then.

SESSION TWO

DISCUSS JIM'S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Jim's story? What were you feeling?
2. In what ways did Jim's abuse affect him?
3. In what ways has your abuse affected you?
4. What are you taking away from Jim's story to help you process your abuse experience?

All the men, whose stories are in this book, have experienced a measure of healing. If you feel their stories all have a happy ending, don't be fooled. They each bear the burden of knowing what happened to them... BUT, through the healing they've experienced, they've learned to function in healthy ways. By reading the positive results in their stories, we want to give you hope for what's possible in your life as well.

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

Many survivors of sexual abuse have found the following Seven Actions helpful in their healing process. These actions aren't intended as a sequential to-do list. Instead, seek to integrate all seven into your life as you face your abuse and move forward toward healing.

Also, resist the temptation to minimize or ignore a particular action. These actions work best in conjunction with each other.

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We will introduce all seven actions this week but only deal with the first one in depth. Then, we'll delve deeper into each of the remaining actions in the weeks that follow.

Seven Healing Actions:

1. Acknowledge the abuse
2. Healing occurs in community
3. Replace the lies with truth
4. Consider the possibility of repressed memories
5. Admit to poor choices and abandon unhealthy coping methods
6. Believe you can experience healing
7. Healing requires both receiving and extending forgiveness

Tonight, we'll focus on
Healing Action #1: Acknowledge the Abuse.

HEALING ACTION 1: ACKNOWLEDGE THE ABUSE

You cannot heal or be set free from something you hide, suppress, or deny. A physical wound or cut will fester and become infected if you choose to ignore it. Instead, you must acknowledge it, clean it and dress it. In the same way you must acknowledge your abuse, confront it, and take steps to heal it.

When we speak of *acknowledging* your abuse, we mean acknowledging it as part of your story and getting it out in the open. You need to drag your abuse out of the darkness and into the light. Shame, guilt, anger, and fear thrive in the dark and in secrecy. This does not mean that the whole world needs to know about your abuse, but you must decide not

SESSION TWO

to hide it any longer. The fact that you are in this group indicates that you're already moving in this direction. And some of you may have already acknowledged your abuse to others.

WHY IT'S SO VITAL TO SHARE YOUR STORY

One of the most effective ways we've found to acknowledge our abuse is by sharing our stories in a safe, confidential environment. We want this group to serve in that way. This is also the reason we've included other men's stories in the reading for each week.

Sexual abuse or assault leaves a man feeling like a victim. Indeed, you were victimized. But as long as a victim remains a victim, you are powerless, vulnerable, broken, and voiceless. A victim-frame-of-mind leaves you feeling trapped and imprisoned by what you have experienced. For this reason, you need to acknowledge your abuse.

But acknowledging your abuse and sharing your story may be frightening for the following reasons:

- You may find it horribly shameful and dirty
- You don't want others to know about it
- You feel guilty and that the abuse was somehow your fault
- You have tried to talk about it in the past and were shut down or not believed
- You don't want to stir up and relive the pain of your abuse
- You may be afraid of threats or other repercussions from sharing

Sexual abuse is usually a secret crime with no witnesses. Due to shame, fear, and perhaps a code of secrecy expected within a family, you may

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have refused to talk about your abuse in the past. So talking about it now may make you feel uncomfortable, or it may seem simply pointless.

It's also important in choosing to whom, when, and where you share your story. And we want to assure you that this group is a safe place to tell your story.

While all those reasons above seem valid, the truth is, any shame, guilt, or fear of exposure will keep you in bondage. It's the shame, guilt, fear and secret memories that torment you. What is acknowledged and brought into the light can no longer haunt you.

However, if your abuse occurred in your family, be aware that by telling your family about it, they may see you as the offender for revealing the family secret. They may respond with anger, bitterness, denial, and rejection. This is why it's so important to share your story in an environment in which you feel safe, accepted and protected.

Dr. Renee Fredrickson is a psychotherapist who specializes in helping people heal from the trauma of sexual abuse. She encourages, "Do not confuse healing with the absence of pain, for healing wounds, whether physical or emotional, always hurts. I can only assure you that the hurt will pass, and the pain will lessen."¹⁶

However, in view of all we've stated above, no one here will force you to tell your story. It's okay if you still feel that the pain is too raw or overwhelming. Throughout this eight-week program, we will give each of you the opportunity to share your story of abuse. But please do not feel pressure to do so if it's just too painful for you. We of all people will understand and accept your decision.

Again, Dr. Renee Fredrickson urges us:

In reality, your life is harder than it need be because you were abused. Dealing with that abuse will enable you to achieve more serenity in your life. My associates and I have a maxim that says the

SESSION TWO

amount of fear you feel about confronting abuse is directly proportional to the impact it is having on your life right now. The greater your fear, the more the abuse is marring your current life.¹⁷

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 1: ACKNOWLEDGE THE ABUSE

Facilitator note read aloud: In your participant manual, there are seven healing actions listed. Let's review those. Would someone like to read those aloud?

1. What fears do you have about acknowledging your abuse and/or sharing it with others?
2. What are your thoughts about what Dr. Fredrickson said?
3. If acknowledging and/or sharing our story is difficult, why do it? What are the benefits?

Facilitator Note: Some benefits are: it gives me a voice, begins healing process, deals with guilt and shame, etc.

HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY

The Participant Manual gives some general guidelines and tips to help you prepare to tell your story. Let's review those.

There truly is victory in sharing your story, so we strongly encourage you to do so and to endure any temporary pain it may cause. Following are some general guidelines to help you prepare to tell your story:

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- Make sure that you feel safe with the group in which you will share.
- Refrain from being overly graphic in your description of your abuse.
- But don't soften the language you use to describe your abuse either. If you were raped, use that explicit term rather than a euphemism like, "He had his way with me."
- Share what happened to you:
 - How old were you when you were first abused?
 - Who was it that abused you?
 - What was the frequency and time span of your abuse?
 - Did you report the abuse and what response did you get when you reported it?
 - In what ways has your abuse impacted your life?
 - Describe the emotions you've experienced resulting from your abuse.
 - What measures have helped you so far in your healing process?

SESSION TWO

FACILITATOR STORY

1. How did you feel about 's story?
2. In what ways did you find it helpful?

CLOSING

1. What is one emotion you felt tonight?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up to the group tonight?
3. How can we end tonight on a positive note?
4. In what way can we support you this week?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Brad's story in Session Three. Respond to the questions following his story. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week. Start your journal. (See below.)

JOURNALING TOWARD HEALING

Many therapists and survivors of sexual abuse encourage us to journal our journey to healing. There are no real guidelines for journaling; no right or wrong way to do it. A journal is a very personal record of what you're feeling and experiencing during the healing process. Record both the pain and the strides you're making toward healing. You can either use the space provided below, pick up a journal for this purpose, or use an electronic means for journaling. Your journal is for your eyes only unless you choose to share it with someone.

From time to time, we encourage you to go back and read your journal and note the progress you've made toward healing.

MY JOURNAL

SESSION THREE

WELCOME!

The amount of fear you feel about confronting abuse is directly proportional to the impact it is having on your life right now.

– Renee Fredrickson, PhD

BRAD'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

We moved a lot when I was a kid. My family wasn't close. We didn't know how to love each other. The only person who showed me physical affection was a pedophile. He was inviting. He knew how to woo a child. He made me feel important. He drew me to him.

My mom sent me over to the neighbor's house when she and Dad were busy. We lived out in the country. A patch of woods separated our house from the neighbor's. Theirs was a white farmhouse with a fence and a barn. They kept horses, cats and dogs. In the barn was a hayloft and that's where I'd meet Donny.

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I was nine years old at the time and Donny was perhaps in his late teens. At the time, I really looked up to this big, older guy. And because I had no male role model at home, Donny became that for me. He told me he was going to show me what it was to be a man.

It all started with games. We'd play Monopoly or cards. Donny introduced me to smoking as a manly practice, so I took to it. The card deck had pictures of naked women on them. Regrettably, I can still graphically remember the first one I saw. That was how he introduced me to porn.

Donny was a master manipulator. I don't think he meant to harm me. I wasn't afraid of him, but I did feel uncomfortable with some of what he did to me.

His strategy was slick and progressive. We'd start playing Monopoly but would "pay our debts" by taking off an item of clothing. Sometimes Donny wore women's clothing—panties and a bra. After some time, we'd both be sitting there naked. Without any more clothes to remove, I had to start "paying my debts" with sexual favors.

The only act he ever performed on me was anal intercourse. Nothing "romantic" ever went on between us—no hugs, kisses, etc. He required other sexual favors from me that I performed on him. He rewarded me with cigarettes. He also taught me to masturbate long before I could even ejaculate. Sometimes I even hurt myself doing it.

I have never forgotten the time I climbed the wooden ladder into the hayloft, I was a bit shocked and scared at what I saw. Donny had plastered the walls and ceiling with pictures of naked women from porn magazines and books he had collected. That's when things escalated.

Frequently after these times with Donny, I remember waking up in a corner of the hayloft naked and in the fetal position. I am still puzzled by this, unsure if I was drugged, traumatized, or both.

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After experiencing this routine daily for nearly six months, I discovered one day that Donny also had “other boys.” I had thought that we had a special, unique relationship. But now I felt scared, betrayed, and no longer special.

Learning of Donny’s other escapades really troubled me, so after school one day I walked into the kitchen where my mom was making dinner. I told her what Donny had been doing to me. Without warning, she grabbed a belt and started beating me with it violently, shouting again and again, “This didn’t happen!” Mom had never done anything like this before. I was confused and scared.

While this beating was going on, we heard someone drive up to the house. She stopped hitting me and looked out the window. It was our pastor. She told me to go to my room and she’d finish with me later. I went to my room, slunk down onto the floor in the far corner and cried.

Our pastor was a gentleman, so when he found out that Dad wasn’t home, he refused to come in the house. We hadn’t been to church in a while and he had come by to see if all was okay. When the pastor left, I braced myself for the beating to continue, but Mom never came.

I stayed curled up in the corner on the floor until Dad came home. Then, Mom came into my room and asked, “What are you doing in here? Supper is ready.” And she never uttered another word about what I had revealed. It was as if our exchange had never happened.

Much later as an adult, I learned that both my parents had been sexually abused as children. Apparently, this was a generational issue in our family and may explain my mom’s strange response to my telling her.

I had asked Christ to come into my life when I was seven and was baptized when I was nine. I always knew masturbating and the things I had done with Donny were wrong. But now I hated Donny for what he had done to me. One of the reasons I had decided to tell my mom about Donny was to call him out and protect the other boys.

Reclaiming My Identity

Everything with Donny stopped abruptly after six months because we had to move. My parents said that a bank loan failed to go through and that forced our move.

Between the ages of 12 and 14, I began taking notice of porn magazines at the store. Somehow, the cashiers let me buy them and I'd keep them for a long time. Sexually, I was very confused at the time. I didn't have homosexual leanings, but probably could've fallen into a similar pattern as before.

I always treated girls around me with respect, but I didn't know how to have a deep relationship with anyone. I was always kind and gentle, but something was missing. I had a hard time believing people could love me. I felt so much guilt and shame. I doubted that God could really love me. I blamed myself for the abuse and assumed it had all been my fault. I felt like I needed to somehow atone for my sin and tried to be baptized again and again.

I had told my mom but no one else, and she apparently suppressed the knowledge of my abuse. I have learned that secrecy keeps us in prison. We have to tell someone what happened to us, but not just anyone.

Now in my 30s, I was a pastor of a church, married with children, and I was addicted to porn and masturbation. I was deeply depressed, a workaholic, lacking confidence, and had very poor relationships. Then one day my wife came to me and told me that she and the kids were leaving me. That got my attention! I knew I needed help.

Immediately, I started calling around hoping to find a marriage conference or something to help me keep my marriage and help me with my addictions. Providentially, Pastor Peter Lord was holding a pastor's conference the very next weekend, so I signed up. I asked if I could bring my wife and they told me I had to bring her. I knew it was a conference for pastors, but beyond that I didn't know the focus of the conference. I was simply desperate to take action.

My wife agreed to go to the conference with me. As we were sitting there, a pastor got up and began telling his story of sexual abuse when he was a child and I began weeping. My wife looked at me and asked me what was

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wrong. I told her, “He’s telling my story!” She had no idea that sexual abuse had been part of my past.

The conference leadership put me in touch with a counselor, Dr. Lewis Gregory, and I started meeting with him. I learned so much from him. Healing isn’t about the hurt going away. You learn to accept it as part of your story and you move forward despite your fears. Your abuse is a scar that you’ll always wear, but it becomes a sacred scar instead of a gaping wound.

I have learned that we all walk with a limp. We all have issues—it doesn’t matter who you are. Your issues may be different than mine, but we’re all broken in need of healing.

DISCUSS BRAD’S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Brad’s story? What were you feeling?
2. In what ways did Brad’s abuse affect him?
3. What are you taking away from Brad’s story to help you process your abuse experience?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 2: HEALING OCCURS IN COMMUNITY

Early on we noted that the majority of sexually abused children know their attackers well. Over a third of their offenders are family members and the others are authority figures in their lives. This makes sexual

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abuse especially horrible and deeply damaging because it usually occurs in the context of relationships that we trust.

As a result, you have not only been *sexually* abused, but *relationally* abused as well. People who should have protected you and kept you safe and free from harm, betrayed you and harmed you. This betrayal intensifies the abuse because it is so contrary to what you had expected and deserved.

The only way to overcome that sense of betrayal and the sexual abuse that occurred in a relational context is to acknowledge your abuse and its impact on you in a safe, caring community. That's why we seek to create a safe group of men who understand, empathize and stand with you in this program.

If you were sexually abused as a child, your childhood, virginity, innocence and even manhood were ripped from you. If you were sexually abused as an adult, you were violated and experienced loss of dignity, loss of self-respect and severe trauma. You were exposed to evil behaviors and experiences that no one should be subjected to. And for that you have suffered greatly.

Perhaps you were threatened or felt obligated not to tell anyone about your abuse. Perhaps you even feel guilty now because you *didn't* report your abuse when it happened. There's no reason to feel guilty for that. You have been forced to carry a very heavy burden and its weight continues to bear down on you. And perhaps you've never had the freedom to truly grieve your great loss. You may also find yourself grieving the loss of close relationships as a result of your abuse.

People grieve differently with different emotions. Even within this group, we will all experience grief differently. So, please be patient and understanding with each other.

When we lose a loved one and grieve over the loss of that person, it's in the context of community with other survivors that we experience

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comfort and healing. A funeral service is not for the dead but for the living. In the same way, you can experience healing from sexual abuse in this community of survivors. We all stand with you. We believe you. We understand you. We accept you. And we care about you.

Grieving comes in stages. It doesn't come all at once like a tsunami. Instead, little by little as gentle waves lap up against your hurt, they slowly wash it away.

As you continue to come to this group, you become those gentle waves for each other. Your grief only finds its voice and consolation in the company of others who care about you. In this way, despite your own pain, you are assisting in the healing of all others in your group. And hopefully, the others are doing the same for you.

As you seek to assist in the healing of others, you'll find your own pain diminishing. Direct your words and actions toward each other in such a way that you rebuild the foundation and structure of what true, loving relationships should look like.

Speak truth to each other. Encourage one another and build each other up. Weep with each other without shame or reservation. Trust each other. And when relief comes, laugh with each other and let its cleansing power release you from the grip of grief and pain.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 2: HEALING OCCURS IN COMMUNITY

1. In what ways has betrayal interfered with relationships in your life?
2. Where or with whom have you had the freedom to express emotion or grieve what happened to you? How did it impact those relationships?

GROUP MEMBER STORY

1. If you shared tonight (today) how are you feeling right now?
2. In what ways has it helped the rest of you to hear this man's story?

SESSION THREE

CLOSING

1. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up to the group tonight?

2. In what way can we support you this week?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Charlie's story in Session Four, respond to the questions following his story, and continue writing in your journal.

SESSION FOUR

WELCOME!

Lies are like shackles that keep us bound to the secrecy and evil that was done to us.

CHARLIE'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

I was 17. We had recently moved from Minneapolis, MN to a tiny town in Idaho with a population under 200. I had already graduated from high school, so I was looking for a full-time job. I finally landed a job as a short-order cook at a bowling alley in a nearby town, but after two weeks, the bowling alley closed, and I was out of work again.

Friends of mine from Minneapolis called and offered me a good-paying job at a mill downtown that manufactured milk-replacer for cattle. My parents didn't want me to leave home yet and urged me to keep looking for a job locally, but nothing turned up. So, I went back to Minneapolis against their wishes and started working at that mill.

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I was living with friends of the family at the time and caught an intestinal bug. When my condition persisted, I went to see a doctor. A nurse led me into an examination room and the male doctor asked the nurse to leave us.

The doctor asked me to drop my pants and shorts and bend over the examination table. He said he was going to give me a rectal exam to check my prostate. I was naïve at the time. I had no idea what the prostate was or what such an exam entailed.

He conducted the rectal exam but became focused on my male anatomy. He basically fondled me for the next 10-15 minutes. All the while I was in a vulnerable position still bent over with my back to him. He said very little and was acting weird. I knew something wasn't right, but as I said I was very naïve and you're supposed to trust a doctor, right?

He finally stopped, told me to get dressed and left the room abruptly. What he did made me sick to my stomach. So, when the nurse came in, I told her I didn't feel well, and she had me sit in the reception area until I felt better. Then, I left.

I stuffed what had happened to me. I didn't tell anyone about it. I felt guilty and ashamed. I blamed myself for the incident, reasoning that it wouldn't have happened if I had stayed in Idaho. I even thought I probably deserved the event for leaving home against my parent's wishes.

About 40 years went by and I never told anyone about what had happened. By now both my parents had passed away without ever knowing about the incident.

Then, one day when I was in my 50s, I went to the doctor (a different one) for an annual checkup. The checkup involved a rectal exam to check my prostate. By this time, I knew what a prostate exam entailed. But this revelation suddenly brought back memories from the incident in the doctor's office in my youth with clarity.

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For so long, I had minimized that event. I reasoned that it wasn't a big deal and had only happened once. Now I relived the incident and felt guilty and ashamed over it for I saw it for what it was. Now, for the first time, I was angry. I had been sexually molested, sexually abused by a doctor whom I had trusted! What he did was sick and wrong.

As I processed that shameful event, I recognized that it wasn't my fault and that I had no cause to feel guilt over it. Going against my parent's wishes had nothing to do with the evil actions this doctor committed against me. He alone was at fault.

Soon after this realization, I shared what had happened to me with my wife. She was very supportive. I also experienced how therapeutic and validating it was to share my story with someone else.

I've often wondered how the sexual abuse has affected me throughout my life. I know now how complex we are psychologically. During my career I suffered two bouts of severe depression. Were the seeds of depression planted by my sexual abuse? I'll never know for sure.

I know that I experienced a serious betrayal of trust as a result of the abuse. And for years, I had a strong aversion to doctors.

I no longer minimize that event saying that it only happened once. Once was too much!

Also, I don't feel angry toward that doctor anymore, I just feel sorry for him. Forgiveness has been a process, but I've been forgiven so much that it's made it easier for me to forgive him. My forgiving him doesn't negate or minimize what he did, but I don't have to carry bitterness toward him anymore.

Recently, I shared my sexual abuse story publicly. After I shared, an elderly man came up to me and thanked me for sharing. He confided in me that he too had been sexually abused as a child, having experienced abuse multiple times over a lengthy period by a family member.

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Again, I recognized how validating it is to share one's story. I believe sharing one's story with others is absolutely essential for healing.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, He has relieved me of all guilt and shame and has given me peace. The sexual abuse is part of my personal story, but it doesn't define me or dictate my thoughts and actions.

DISCUSS CHARLIE'S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Charlie's story? What were you feeling?
2. What were some of the lies that Charlie embraced?
3. How did the lies he believed affect his life and healing?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 3: REPLACE THE LIES WITH TRUTH

Due to the secrecy that cloaks sexual abuse, every stitch of the fabric of secrecy is woven with lies. The lies are many and varied. Many of these lies were spoken over you by your abuser, or by other people in your life. In his story, Charlie talked about the lies he believed. Some of the common lies associated with sexual abuse include such falsehoods and fabrications like:

- "This is normal behavior."
- "I did something to deserve or cause my abuse."

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- “It’s my fault that I was abused.”
- “There is something deeply wrong with me.”
- “I am worthless, dirty, soiled goods.”
- “I will always be irreparably broken.”
- “No one will believe me.”
- “I’m unworthy of genuine love.”
- “I am powerless to make changes in my life.”

Again, those are all LIES! Sexual abuse is never “normal” or acceptable behavior. Sexual abuse was never your fault. You are not irreparably broken, and nothing is deeply wrong with you. We believe you! You are worthy of genuine love and meaningful relationships.

In previous groups, some men have expressed the following, “When I was abused, I sometimes enjoyed the feeling of being sexually stimulated. Yet, I knew what was happening to me was wrong. This stirred up complex feelings of confusion, guilt and shame.”

The fact that you may have experienced some level of pleasure in the abuse doesn’t make you a willing participant. That’s where the lie creeps in. Our bodies are designed to respond to physical stimulation—sometimes even against our will. You shouldn’t carry guilt over something that you did not invite or consent to.

The only way to demolish a lie is with truth. You must replace the lies you’ve believed with truth. You might think this is primarily a logical, intellectual exercise, but it is not. In the case of the lies spawned through sexual abuse, overcoming them is largely a matter of your will. The problem is that your emotions may betray you. The emotions you’re feeling may seem to confirm some of those lies.

But emotions are fickle. You can be sad one moment and happy the next. But by engaging your will you can begin to control and change

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your emotions to behave the way you want them to. You do this through speaking truth to yourself and by hearing the truth from others and accepting it.

While this may seem weird, we encourage you to speak truth to yourself aloud. By doing this, you not only engage your mind and mouth, but you hear it as well. Speaking truth aloud like this reinforces and embeds these truths in your mind and heart and you begin to live these truths.

Some of these truths might include:

- “It was not my fault I was sexually abused.”
- “What my abuser did to me was awful and wrong.”
- “No one’s evil actions toward me make me dirty or soiled.”
- “I am masculine and loved by others.”
- “Though I was hurt, I am healing and getting stronger.”
- “I am valued and respected by others.”
- “The innocence and manhood that was taken from me, I take back.”
- “The people who count in my life believe me.”

Also, when someone compliments you, to what extent do you downplay or dismiss their compliment? You might think you’re doing this out of a sense of humility, but you’re unknowingly rejecting the truth they’re speaking over you. Instead, accept their compliment and thank them.

In the last session, we talked about the fact that healing occurs in community. The community you experience in this group also serves in a powerful way to replace lies with truth. We do this for each other by affirming one another. We all need to contradict those lies and falsehoods with truth.

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For this reason, as you're together, catch each other if you hear someone stating a lie. Gently call it to their attention and replace the lie by affirming a truth for them. For this to function well, you must be genuine, caring, and transparent with each other.

As you journal this session, list any lies that you've believed surrounding your abuse and replace them with truths. Begin speaking truth to yourself to demolish those old lies.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 3: REPLACE THE LIES WITH TRUTH

1. What are some clues that would suggest that there is a lie beneath a struggle you are facing?
2. What are some of the lies that you've identified in your own story?
3. What truths can you replace those lies with?

GROUP MEMBER'S STORY

1. If you shared today (tonight) how are you feeling right now?
2. In what ways has it helped the rest of you to hear this man's story?

CLOSING

1. In what way can we end on a positive note tonight?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up to the group tonight?
3. In what way can we support you this week?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Brian's story in Session Five, respond to the questions following his story, and continue writing in your journal.

CONTINUE JOURNALING

SESSION FIVE

WELCOME!

Your mind has played a trick on you, but it is a trick to help you rather than hurt you. When you were abused you were too young and too fragile to retain the memory, or you may have undergone torment too appalling to handle in any other way. You needed your strength for play, for learning, for seeking and holding on to whatever love you could find in your world. So your wonderful, powerful mind hid some or all of the abuse from you until you were strong enough to face it.

— Renee Fredrickson, PhD

BRIAN'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

When I was seven years old, two female babysitters sexually abused me. But the experience was so traumatic for me that I repressed its awful memory and wouldn't recall it until years later. For the time being, I had locked that abuse away so I could continue to function.

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Shortly after that incident, my mom asked me which babysitters I liked best. I remember telling her, "I don't want that babysitter!" But when she asked me why, I couldn't tell her. But we never had that babysitter or her friend back again.

Between the fifth and sixth grade, I entered puberty and became more aware of my body. No one had ever taught me about the sexuality of the body, so I was left to my own exploration and experimentation. The first time I ejaculated, it scared me. I had no idea what was happening to me. I only knew that it felt good.

Even before this, my older brother and I had found pornographic magazines in our home. We discovered both my dad's stash and my mom's. In this way, I was exposed to both the male and female anatomy in very graphic ways. As a result, I was soon addicted to porn, sexual fantasies, and masturbation.

My sexual addictions gave me temporary sensual pleasure, but always left me craving more. I found it all extremely unsatisfying, but every episode heightened my urges and flung me deeper into its grip. This culminated in junior high when I started fantasizing about my male friends. I felt conflicted, being both ashamed and enticed by these sexual fantasies. I didn't know how to deal with this conflict, so I stuffed it. At the time, I didn't have the courage to tell anyone or ask for help.

In junior high, I became active in my church and wanted to please God but didn't understand how He could help me with my addictions. So, all during high school and then college, I would vacillate between trying to please God and feeding my lust for sexual expression.

In college, I was meeting with a small group of guys on a regular basis. At one point I confessed to them my struggles with porn, masturbation, and same-sex attraction. As a result, a few of my friends confided in me that they struggled with the same issues. This was not healthy for me (or them) and one of the guys and I started messing around. From that time onward, everything started spiraling down.

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In my mid 20s I initiated sexual contact with a 17-year-old boy. I was incredibly remorseful and scared. I wanted to be free from this addiction! So, I went to the elders of our church and confessed what I had done. And because the boy was still a minor, they had to report the offense. They did so discretely and properly.

But it was a year before I was charged. That year of waiting was hellish! After they sentenced me, I spent five days in jail, and they put me on probation for four years. Those four years were very difficult. My probation was highly regulated with weekly check-ins and monthly polygraph tests. I had to keep a log of everything I did—even when I masturbated—and the polygraphs would expose any lies or gaps in reporting. During my probation, I also had to go to counseling each week.

About three years into my probation, my girlfriend and I became sexually active. She got pregnant and had a baby boy. I had finished my counseling requirement, so I assumed I was now a free man. My girlfriend and I got married and I moved in with her. Soon she was pregnant again.

However, my probation officer shocked me with the news that getting married was in violation of my probation. Until now, the court had withheld judgment, but because I had violated my probation, the law came down on me in full force. The judge sentenced me to six months in prison at a militaristic penal facility to be followed by another five-year probation.

My life was falling apart. I was married with one child and another one on the way. As a felon, I feared losing my family and gave up hope that I would ever have anything but menial jobs for the rest of my life. At this point, I was out of options. I was totally broken. I recognized my desperate situation and cried out to God—not merely to rescue me from this dark future, but from my addictions that had brought all this on me.

After six months, I had successfully completed the program in prison. I was released a couple days after Thanksgiving that year and was required to

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register as a sex offender. My parents brought me home. Everyone in the car was quiet all the way home.

My wife and kids lived within view of my parent's home, but I was not allowed to see my kids for six months, and my wife didn't want to see me.

Again, during my probation, I was required to go to counseling every week. In one of my counseling sessions, the counselor asked me, "What's this issue you have with women? What's behind that?" Up to that point in my life, I could count the number of women on one hand with whom I was able to have any normal relationship.

That afternoon I went to work, and in the wee hours of the morning I was driving home in the dark. It was raining and the roads were void of other cars. I began pondering that question the counselor had asked me and suddenly I recalled the sexual abuse when I was seven years old. The incident began to replay in my mind and unfold vividly layer by layer.

I remembered that our teenage female babysitter had brought a girlfriend with her that day. They took me outback behind the house and forced me to take off all my clothes. Then they laughed at my privates. They used my hand to stimulate them to orgasm. All this made me extremely uncomfortable and fearful around women.

As these memories flooded into my mind, at first, I thought, "Am I making this up? How could I have forgotten this?"

So, later that day, I called my brother and told him what I had remembered. He confirmed that the sexual abuse did indeed happen, not only with me but with him as well. The girls had sexually abused my brother too, and that was the first I had heard of it.

Through counseling, I spent the next several years unraveling my sexual abuse. During that time, my wife and I reconciled. My probation officer allowed us to live together and we had two more children. Finally, I completed my probation

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period successfully. My probation officer told me that my transformation was unique. She saw the change that God had wrought in my life.

As I mentioned before, it took many years to recognize that I was a victim as I thought I had done something wrong and that it was my fault. And I had loathed myself for it. But now I realized that I was a victim of someone else's evil deeds. And as counterintuitive as it might seem, forgiving those girls became an important part of my healing.

Forgiving them allowed me to affirm that I was the victim and was not the one who was wrong, but wronged. Forgiving them made it possible for me to put closure on the pain. Although I was never able to find out why they chose to abuse me, or what might have occurred in their own lives to drive them to it, I was able to put this in God's hands and receive healing from Him.

Around that time, my employer offered me a job promotion to a management position that has allowed me to travel, has paid me handsomely, and gives me a great deal of responsibility and authority. Twelve years ago, we were living in an old, run-down single-wide trailer and had no money. Today, we live in a beautiful large home in a nice neighborhood. I have my loving wife and four beautiful children. And I have God to thank for it all!

No matter how deep and dark the depravity of the abuser or the victim, God can transform any life if you'll let Him. Do I still experience temptation? Sure, but it no longer controls me, and God continues to heal me. I live in freedom!

DISCUSS BRIAN'S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Brian's story? What were you feeling?

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2. In what ways did Brian's sexual abuse affect him?

3. What are you taking away from Brian's story to help you process your abuse experience?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF REPRESSED MEMORIES

During severe trauma, our minds often employ a coping mechanism that allows us to repress those traumatic memories, so we can continue to live with some semblance of normalcy. With instances of childhood sexual abuse, a child's brain often represses the memory of the trauma as a defense mechanism that allows the child to continue to function despite the abuse.

According to psychoanalyst Renee Fredrickson, "Sexual abuse is particularly susceptible to memory repression." She goes on to explain:

Memory repression thrives in shame, secrecy, and shock. The shame and degradation experienced during a sexual assault is profound, especially for children who have no concept of what is happening to them or why. Sexual abuse is so bizarre and horrible that the frightened child feels compelled to bury the event deep inside his or her mind.¹⁸

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Dr. Jim Hopper is a clinical psychologist with expertise in psychological trauma due to child abuse and sexual assault. Dr. Hopper explains that it is common for those who were sexually abused as children “to go for many years, even decades, without having (recognizable or explicit) memories of the abuse.”¹⁹ They may experience emotional or physiological responses triggered by something associated with the abuse, but they may not comprehend why or where these responses are coming from. This can be very unnerving causing the person to feel like they’re going crazy, which they are not.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF REPRESSED MEMORIES

In Brian’s story above, you read about how he discovered his repressed memories. In the beginning, he couldn’t remember being sexually abused but it obviously had a profound effect on how he viewed women and sex in general. Brian displayed numerous indicators of the abuse, but it was a counselor that helped prompt the memories of his sexual abuse.

You may either know or suspect you were sexually abused, but you may not currently know the extent of your abuse. Following are some warning signs that you *may have* repressed memories:²⁰

- A terrifying sense of anxiety associated with an odd phobia
- Shock and confusion about one’s odd behaviors and reactions
- Anxiety attacks that are paralyzing
- Despair and lethargy
- Other symptoms of PTSD
- Nothing that seems to account for the above problems
- The sudden onset of the above indicators

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- Experiencing the above issues despite a general sense of well-being or happiness
- Sexual addictions
- A particularly odd phobia like: fear of bathrooms; flashbacks when you hear a shower; being touched or caressed in a certain way by your wife or girlfriend; etc.
- Events or objects unknowingly associated with childhood sexual abuse can trigger suppressed memories
- Someone else's story of abuse may trigger an unusually strong response from you

Not everyone who has been sexually abused displays the above symptoms. Also, the presence of one or more of these symptoms does not serve as proof-positive that you were abused as a child.

When victims of sexual abuse hear about repressed memories, a common response is, "Why would I *want* to remember those awful incidents? I'm trying to put them behind me!"

But Dr. Renee Fredrickson explains:

Repressed memories affect your quality of life. Deciding to search out the hidden secrets in your past will be as rewarding as it is painful. Not only will you have the opportunity to finally address the damage from the abuse itself, but you will also be able to free yourself from the burden of carrying repressed trauma memories. Burying memories and keeping them buried takes mental energy. When you bring those memories to the conscious level, your mind and body will no longer have to struggle to suppress such a heavy load.²¹

Sometimes certain events or experiences will call back repressed memories without effort on your part. But most often, recalling repressed memories requires the help of a professional therapist.

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With repressed memories, as your story unfolds, you may experience shock, anger, bargaining, denial, and finally acceptance as each memory surfaces. This is the common, normal response to grief and how we process it. Like Brian, you may also wonder, “Am I imagining this, or did it really happen?”

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF REPRESSED MEMORIES

1. Many victims suspect they have been sexually abused but are reluctant to consider the possibility of repressed memories. If the possibility of repressed memories exists, why would you even want to remember them?
2. According to your notes, why might it be important to get the help needed to recall what happened to you?
3. What challenges or obstacles would a victim need to overcome in order to pursue healing from repressed memories?

GROUP MEMBER STORY

1. If you shared tonight, how are you feeling right now?
2. In what ways has it helped the rest of you to hear this man’s story?

CLOSING

1. In what way can we end on a positive note tonight?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up to the group tonight?
3. In what way can we support you this week?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Russ's story in Session Six, respond to the questions following his story, and continue writing in your journal.

CONTINUE JOURNALING

SESSION SIX

WELCOME!

Sexual abuse often creates a twenty-eight-car pileup with massive debris, bent metal, and wounded victims. It spirals into generations. It sinks into the depths of the heart.

— Dr. Dan Allender

RUSS'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

When I was ten or eleven, my older sister was in gymnastics. She was participating in a meet in another town and my mom had brought me along. That night, she dropped me off at my uncle's house while she and my sister stayed at a hotel close to where the meet was taking place.

It was warm that night, so my two cousins suggested that the three of us boys sleep outside. The older of my two cousins is about three years older than I am. He was an aggressive, intimidating boy and once we got outside, he suggested that we engage in sexual acts with each other. He said, "Everyone has to be gay once in their life."

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I had experimented a few years before this in an exploratory manner, but nothing like what my cousin wanted to do that night. I was afraid of him and scared to say, "No." He made me conduct oral sex on him and he performed anal intercourse with me. All this while his younger brother observed.

The whole time, I just wanted it to be over. I remember thinking, "I don't like doing this." I was also scared that someone (an adult) would find out. I was fearful of both the act and of being found out. But my uncle never came out and to my knowledge, he never found out what we did that night.

In the years to follow, whenever we went to my uncle's house, I avoided interaction with my cousin. I didn't know how to relate to him. The whole incident haunted me. I knew that what we had done was wrong. I kicked myself for playing along and chalked it up to being a "dumb kid."

When I was 12, my mom was in a serious auto accident that confined her to a wheelchair. With her disability and the fact that my dad was now gone all the time at work, I felt neglected and abandoned. It was a very sad time in my life.

Also, my older sister became very "bitchy" in high school. This only added to my sadness and the dysfunction I felt in my family. Later, I learned that she had been sexually abused by the same cousin, which probably accounted for her moods and anger. A couple years earlier I had embraced Christianity, but instead of turning to God to help me through this time, I turned away from Him.

In college, I immersed myself in pornography and that opened the door for strong sexual cravings. I started looking for male sexual partners on the internet and meeting up with them to satisfy my urgings. I also began using drugs and threw myself into heavy exercise to cope.

I hated my life. I knew what I was doing was hurting me in life and that it was not acceptable behavior. Ironically, I was studying to become a therapist and used my studies as an excuse to become fluent in the effects of sexual addictions.

SESSION SIX

In my senior year at college my life plummeted to a new low and I decided to hang myself in a tree in the backyard where I was living. I had planned it all out and was bent on following through with it. But then, in a moment that I can only describe as coming from God, I heard Him ask me, "What about your friends?"

In my mind, I saw my friends coming home that night to find me swinging from the tree by a rope around my neck. I couldn't shake that image and the hurt and trauma it would put them through, so I abandoned my plan to take my life.

I began seeing a therapist to overcome my sexual addiction and was free from acting out my urgings for a whole year. Then I had a relapse, slipped into my old ways, and found a sexual partner online. But with that encounter, something inside me snapped and I gained a new resolve to change my life.

I recognized that for me to permanently shed my addictions I needed God's help, I needed other godly people around me, and I needed healthy relationships with them. So, I joined a local church and started attending a small group. I also began reading my Bible and praying every day. My new focus was, "How do I get closer to God?"

I also continued seeing a counselor. My experience with one therapist did not go well, but the one I'm seeing now is really helping. I've been clean now for two years, but it's been a struggle. Only a year-and-a-half ago, I finally came to the realization that I had been sexually abused and have recognized the profound impact it had on my behavior and emotional state ever since.

Acknowledging that I was sexually abused by my cousin was a turning point for me. Until then, I had merely dismissed that night as a stupid, kid thing I had done. And I blamed myself for not refusing to participate.

Sexual abuse leaves us with a self-loathing, which explains why I continued to seek sexual acts with men even though I knew I was punishing myself. Consequently, forgiving myself has been very difficult I've also struggled with minimizing my abuse. After all, it was just one night, right? But without

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question that one fateful night dragged me through some very dark places for many years.

One thing that has helped me tremendously is being open to getting worse before getting better. Rehearsing all the pain and hurt in therapy really sucks! You feel like your wounds are all being ripped open again. The pain is fresh. You're in danger of experiencing those awful cravings again. But I know I can't heal from what I deny or ignore.

I am still healing. The sexual abuse and my subsequent life choices are now part of my story. But I am healing. I want to progress rather than simply be over it. You don't just get over sexual abuse.

The progress I'm making I see as the result of many good choices: cultivating my relationship with God; hanging out with other healthy followers of Jesus who accept me for who I am; spending time with a good therapist; recognizing and acknowledging that I was sexually abused; and being okay with simply progressing—moving forward.

DISCUSS RUSS'S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Russ's story? What were you feeling?

2. In what ways did Russ's abuse affect him?

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3. What were some of the poor life choices that Russ made because of his abuse? What are some of the poor life choices you have made that could be linked to being sexually abused?
4. Russ's lifestyle and beliefs changed. What influenced those changes? How does this inspire you?
5. Throughout this curriculum, you've read and heard other men's stories who were victims of sexual abuse. What have you learned in SAVAnon that could help another victim?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 5: ADMIT TO POOR CHOICES AND ABANDON UNHEALTHY COPING METHODS

Sexual abuse often has profound effects on a person's behavior. When a man starts believing the lies that he is worthless, dirty, and soiled, he may start living his life accordingly. Also, through the sexual abuse he may have learned to use his body and sex to manipulate people to get what he wants. He may also believe that what he wants is sex, but never find it fulfilling.

All those feelings and more can lead to a life of desperation resulting in self-destructive behaviors such as:

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- Promiscuity
- Addiction to drugs
- Alcohol abuse
- Cutting and other forms of self-mutilation
- Prostitution
- Failed marriages
- Deep depression
- Suicidal thoughts and tendencies
- An inordinate drive to excel and succeed at everything
- Poor relational skills

When you add one or more of these self-destructive behaviors to the trauma you're already experiencing from your sexual abuse, the result is devastating. Although these behaviors may be totally understandable under the circumstances, they only serve to prolong and worsen your trauma.

In Russ's story, he felt like damaged goods because of what someone else did to him. As a result, the shame he carried from the abuse drove him to despise himself and "punish" himself by yielding to self-destructive behaviors.

One of the keys to your healing is to recognize and acknowledge any self-destructive behaviors in your life, to denounce them as part of your abuse, and abandon them. Those behaviors only prolong and intensify your pain.

Some of those behaviors are not easy to walk away from. You may need to seek help through therapy, a recovery or 12-Step program, and close friends to break free from the bondage of these things. Your journey may take considerable time and be difficult as you experience setbacks and challenges associated with leaving an addiction.

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Finding freedom from self-destructive behaviors is an integral part of your healing from the trauma of sexual abuse. Following are three steps toward freedom from unhealthy coping methods:

1. Your first step is admitting or acknowledging that you are engaging in an unhealthy coping method. Acknowledge this to others, like this group, to help you resolve to abandon this practice.
2. Next, seek the necessary help to remove this behavior from your life and take the steps they prescribe to help you break free.
3. Stay with it and watch yourself heal. Make yourself accountable to one or more individuals who love you and will stand by you.

The shame you feel says, “You are bad” and leads to self-destructive behaviors. By changing your thoughts to: “Something bad happened to me,” you can learn to extend grace to yourself and do things that help rather than harm you.

You’ve already suffered enough from the trauma of your sexual abuse. Unhealthy coping methods worsen and prolong your pain. Decide now to take the necessary steps to abandon any of those behaviors. Use your journal to identify and acknowledge any unhealthy coping methods.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 5: ADMIT TO POOR CHOICES AND ABANDON UNHEALTHY COPING METHODS

1. According to your notes, what leads to self-destructive behaviors?

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2. What is the first step to freeing yourself from self-destructive behaviors?
3. We are on week 6 of an 8-week program. It's time to start considering what your next steps will be after this group ends. Using Russ's story as an example, what are some next steps you could take?
4. What other steps would you like to pursue?

GROUP MEMBER STORY

After a participant has shared his story debrief:

1. If you shared today (tonight) how are you feeling right now?
2. In what ways has it helped the rest of you to hear this man's story?

SESSION SIX

CLOSING

1. In what way can we end on a positive note tonight?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up to the group tonight?
3. In what way can we support you this week?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Paul's story in Session Seven, respond to the questions following his story, and continue writing in your journal.

SESSION SEVEN

WELCOME!

Holding a grudge is like giving the offender free rent in your head.

— Unknown

GREG'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

I come from a family of generational sex offenders and victims. My uncle Stan, my dad's brother, was an offender. The whole family knew what he was. He had sexually molested his stepdaughter, my sister, my stepbrothers, my stepsister, and who knows who else. Then one day, he attacked me.

Despite his known deviant sexual activities, he somehow talked my parents into letting him take me to the state fair. Like most sex offenders, he was a master manipulator. I was seven years old at the time. Uncle Stan was friendlier than normal and bought me all the delicious fair food I wanted.

Then, he took me to the Tilt-a-Whirl, and we climbed inside one of the shells. He had me sit in the corner, and with the hood and walls of the shell around

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us, no one could see in. As the ride began spinning, he thrust his hand into my pants and began unbuckling his belt with his other hand. I had no idea what he was doing to me or why.

I don't know how far he would have taken things, but with the spinning all that rich fair food decided to come up and I vomited all over him and me. He started yelling at me and due to the whirling, some of it got in his mouth and he started vomiting too. Then, he began beating me and punching me in the genitals.

When we got off the ride, he dragged me over by the Ferris wheel, grabbed my shoulders and kicked me hard in the groin. Then he left me there. I was hurt, scared, and confused, "What did I do to deserve this?" He had really tried to hurt me.

I wandered around the fairgrounds and found someone in charge, and they called my dad. He came and picked me up, but we didn't talk about what happened. Like so many other similar incidents, this one too got buried in the family. Later, I wondered why Dad hadn't taken Stan out, because he knew what kind of man he was. But it would've been like pulling a loose thread on a sweater and the whole family would have unraveled.

That wasn't the last time I saw my uncle Stan, but after that he always hated me. Once, my mom broke her leg skiing and left my sister and me with my aunt and uncle. I was in the next room with his two daughters and suddenly he burst into the room yelling at them for something they hadn't done. Then, he pulled their pants down and made me watch while he spanked their bare bottoms. He was a sick man!

I learned years later that both he and my dad had been sexually abused into their teen years by others they should have been able to trust.

At a young age, I always wondered what was wrong with me to deserve the kind of treatment I got from my family. But when I got into my teen years, I realized that my family was crazy and dysfunctional. My poor sister had been sexually molested, and it affected her by making her hypersexual, so

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that by the time she graduated from high school she had already had four or five abortions.

I grew up in the remote village of Bethel, Alaska. My mom was very wealthy and loved to travel and we always toured countries with a large entourage of people—both family and friends. On one such trip to the British Isles, I was 13 years old. I hadn't grown into my man body yet. I was pudgy and had long blond hair.

While traveling through Scotland by train, four of us kids were sleeping in the bunks in our berth. Suddenly, I woke up feeling sick to my stomach and found two large, drunk Scotsmen over me and one of them had his hand in my pants. His look of surprise told me they had been expecting a girl.

I yelled, "What are you doing!?" He punched me hard in the face, then they stripped me, rolled me over, and raped me. The others in the berths across from me were awake and saw what was happening but froze in fear.

When the men left, I got up and dressed. I was bleeding in my underwear and into my pants. I went to my mom and pulled her into the hallway to speak to her privately. I told her what they had done to me, and just then, one of the two men stumbled out of their compartment. He came up to Mom and tried to apologize to her. She had a Bic lighter in her hand and shot a flame out that singed his eyebrows.

Then, the second guy came out and Mom yelled at him to get back into his compartment. Then she pulled the emergency chain—but nothing happened, so she pulled it again. Then, she grabbed my hand and we tried to leave our car, but we found both ends of the car locked. Apparently, the conductor knew there was a problem and put the car in lockdown.

Soon, we pulled into a major train station and the platform was crawling with policemen. As soon as the train stopped, they stormed our car. Mom told them about the two guys, and they hauled them out. We went to the police station and the investigator asked me to tell him in detail everything that had happened.

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Then the investigator asked Mom, "What do you want to do?" Mom asked me if I was okay, meaning, was I physically okay. I was resilient and told her I was alright, so we left. At the time, I thought my mom was wonderful because she didn't allow this incident to spoil our vacation. But once again, this got buried. She never told my dad and none of the witnesses in my compartment every spoke a word of it.

Experiences like that affect different people in different ways. Trauma from sexual abuse is like a gateway drug that leads to all kinds of junk. For me, I longed for a functional relationship. I saw all the dysfunction around me and felt an overwhelming need to rescue people. As twisted as it sounds, I felt like I needed to be used by others.

I dated a girl for eight years. Everyone in her family were alcoholics and I was always trying to save them and her. She eventually drank herself to death in her early 30s. I just didn't know how to do relationships, and somehow or another I always managed to sabotage them.

By profession, I was a nightclub entertainer, musician and standup comedian. As I grew in popularity, alcohol and drugs became readily available to me as a perk of the job and I was hooked. My lifestyle and my past soon began to destroy my physical and emotional health, my marriage and family, and my finances. I hated my life. I knew I was enslaved to a master that was killing me, but I couldn't break free.

When I married my wife, we had an argument early in our marriage. She pushed me and I pushed her back. She fell and hit her eye on the fireplace, and it gave her a big black eye. I was scared to death! I realized, "I'm acting just like my parents!"

That incident caused me to kick my drug and alcohol habit on my own for a while. During this brief time, I started coming home at a reasonable hour after work and my wife saw a glimmer of hope that I really was changing. But again, I fell into the clutches of drugs and alcohol and spiraled down

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to depths I had not yet known. However, I was a good actor. I was good at faking life.

Ironically, for six years during this time, the happy, the smiling faces of me, my wife, and our daughter appeared on TV and in print ads promoting health club memberships. Promotional material usually loses its effectiveness well before six years, but the health club believed we “epitomized the ideal family” and it sold memberships. Little did the public know that the “family man” in those ads was living a double life.

Then one night, my wife dropped me off at the nightclub. As usual I went to the back door to avoid having to talk to people. But the back door was a vile place. It’s where the garbage was dumped, where people vomited from too much drink, and where bouncers tossed out troublemakers.

That night, I became overwhelmed with the stench and filth of that place. As I looked around taking it all in, I saw how it mirrored my own life. In desperation, right then and there, I dropped to my knees in the muck. I threw my hands toward heaven and begged God to either save me or kill me.

Tears were streaming down my face as I pleaded desperately to God. I became vaguely aware of people passing near me laughing at me. Apparently, they thought this was some new gig designed to entertain them.

When I got up, I knew I had to somehow make a clean break from my lifestyle. But I was blown away by what happened next.

I walked into the nightclub resolved to quit that very night. And as I entered, I saw an old friend sitting at the bar drinking coffee. I walked up to him and greeted him. I asked him what in the world he was doing there. This friend was my former boss. He explained that he was there to ask me to come back to work for him managing a warehouse. He told me he needed my expertise badly and to name my terms.

I accepted his job offer on the spot. Then I called my wife to tell her what I had done. That night as I left the nightclub, I walked away from my drug and

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alcohol addictions as well. God was already working in my life and for the first time I felt hopeful.

Shortly after this, the events of September 11, 2001, prompted my wife and me to go to church. We attended for several weeks and were overwhelmed by the love and kindness of God we felt there. One Sunday evening we decided to go to the new members class, and we heard a clear presentation of the Gospel. My wife surrendered her life to God. I left undecided but wrote on a note that I needed prayer.

The following morning, as I was opening the warehouse, I noticed a voice message on my cell phone. When I listened to the message, it was from a man at the church who had read my request from the night before. He told me he was praying for me and he wanted me to know that he felt a connection with me. Then, he said, "Greg, I know you don't know me, but I love you."

I was stunned. Normally I would have thought such a message corny, weird, and maybe even inappropriate. But that morning, standing at my receiving desk in the busy warehouse, this was the message God used to draw me to Himself. I listened to the message again and again. And then, right there in the warehouse, I broke down and surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. Immediately, God began His transforming work in my life—a work that I had hopelessly tried and failed at on my own.

Just a year after I had surrendered my life to Christ, an incident occurred at home that showed me how thoroughly God had changed me. I was playing the piano when my ten-year-old daughter climbed into my lap and asked me to teach her to play the song I was playing. I had her place her hands on mine to follow my lead.

As we played, my daughter began asking me questions about dating when she was older. Then she asked, "Daddy, when it's time for me to get married, how will I find a boy like you?" Tears streamed down my face as I realized the darkness-to-light transformation I had experienced with Christ leading my life. My daughter's question was testimony to that change!

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Many more years have passed now, and my family and I continue to experience the joy of life change that Jesus Christ has brought about in every area of our lives. Jesus has made all things new. My life is living proof that Jesus Christ can profoundly change us, even from sexual abuse and all our dysfunction. Thank God, He has broken that chain of generational sexual abuse in our family!

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." – 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NKJV)

DISCUSS GREG'S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Greg's story? What were you feeling?
2. In what ways did Greg's abuse affect him?
3. What else are you taking away from Greg's story to help you process your abuse experience?
4. To what extent do you think God could do for you what He has done for Greg and the other men whose stories you read?
5. What do you see as your next step in the healing process? How will you act on this?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 6: HEALING REQUIRES BOTH EXTENDING AND RECEIVING FORGIVENESS

Receiving Forgiveness

By now in this manual, you've read the stories of seven men who are survivors of sexual abuse. Many of these men expressed the vital role that forgiveness played in their healing.

Forgiveness is incredibly restorative. Receiving and extending forgiveness offers a cleansing, renewed emotional outlook. Receiving and extending forgiveness is vital to your healing process.

You might be wondering why we would be talking about *receiving* forgiveness since you were the one abused. To be clear, we're not talking about a need for forgiveness for the abuse you experienced. We've already settled the fact that the abuse was not your fault.

However, men who have been sexually abused usually feel a tremendous sense of shame and guilt associated with their abuse. We express feeling dirty, soiled, and like trash. Even though we did not bring the abuse upon ourselves, we feel a need for cleansing. But how and from whom?

Also, as we've seen, the sexual abuse we experienced has often driven us to poor choices and unhealthy behaviors. In anger, frustration, shame or fear, we may have lashed out at others. Under the weight of great depression, we may have resorted to self-destructive behaviors or tried to numb the pain with drugs, alcohol and sex. Although we were not responsible for our abuse, we are responsible for our responses to it. And for this reason, we need to receive forgiveness ourselves.

This week as you read Greg's story, he described how he surrendered his life to Christ and that God began His transforming work in his life—a work that Greg had hopelessly tried and failed at on his own. Greg admitted his need for Jesus to radically change his life and He has. As I write this,

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I've been a personal friend of Greg's for nearly 20 years and I can attest to the transformation that Christ has brought about in his life.

Today, Jesus extends this same invitation to each of us. Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Regardless of our past and what we've done or what was done to us, Jesus can forgive us and cleanse us from all guilt and shame and give us a new life. Jesus has the authority to do this because He is God's Son.

His forgiveness is nothing we can earn. We're helpless to do that. Instead, Jesus paid for our sins by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. By simply trusting Him, He forgives us and reconciles us with God.

All the men whose stories you've read in this manual have experienced this forgiveness from Jesus. Jesus has helped them heal from their abuse and has given them a new life.

Our intent is not to convert you to some religion or force a belief on you. We simply want to introduce you to the Person of Jesus Christ and share with you what He has done in our lives and what He can do for you too. Because of this, we feel we would be remiss if we did not share Jesus' amazing and deep love for you and the cleansing and forgiveness you can experience through knowing Him.

Whether or not you choose to follow Jesus, we still love and respect you and desire to assist you in your healing process. If you would like to experience God's forgiveness, following is a prayer of repentance:

Thank you, Jesus for dying for me. Thank you for accepting me as I am. Please forgive me my sins and cleanse me from the burden of guilt and shame that I've carried. I love you and thank you for loving me. Amen.

And here is the amazing thing: When Jesus forgives us and restores our relationship with God, He doesn't do so grudgingly or with unpleasant

conditions. He makes us His children, holy and blameless in God's sight. This is not something we can do for ourselves, but something only He can do for us.

This has been the experience for all the men whose stories you've read in this manual. Jesus has helped them heal from their abuse and given them a new life. As Greg put it, "Many more years have passed now, and my family and I continue to experience the joy of life change that Jesus Christ has brought about in every area of our lives. Jesus has made all things new. My life is living proof that Jesus Christ can profoundly change us, even from sexual abuse and all our dysfunction."

When we interviewed the men, whose stories are included here, we did not coach them in what to say. We simply took down their stories. Each man shared with us how a relationship with Jesus Christ helped him heal and offered him a fresh start in life.

In addition to receiving forgiveness, it's also vital to our healing that we extend forgiveness.

Extending Forgiveness

You might be wondering, "Why do I even need to consider extending forgiveness to someone who abused me?"

From an emotional and spiritual standpoint, extending forgiveness is something that's done from a position of power and authority. Like some of the men explained, when we see ourselves as victims, we're powerless and imprisoned by that mentality. But when we extend forgiveness, we break free from that which has held us captive.

Forgiveness is something we must give freely. No one can demand or pry forgiveness from us. For forgiveness to be genuine, it must be given willingly. When we forgive our offender, we do so by exercising our will with grace and mercy.

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Conversely, when we withhold forgiveness and hold a grudge against someone, we thereby admit that they hold power over us. We thereby grant them “free rent” in our minds and thoughts. As someone has so aptly put it, “Holding a grudge is like taking poison and hoping the other person will die.” Our bitterness and anger toward our offender keep us victims of their abuse.

Holding a grudge and withholding forgiveness eats away at us. It consumes us and makes us bitter, cynical, and untrusting. This attitude oozes out of us affecting even those we love. This is why extending forgiveness is so vital to our healing from sexual abuse.

As you reflect back to when you were sexually abused, perhaps you’re thinking, “I could never forgive that person!” You might recall Jim’s story and that he explained, “Forgiveness played a crucial role in my relationship with my mother who had been part of the abuse.”

And Charlie wrote, “I don’t feel angry toward that doctor anymore, I just feel sorry for him. Forgiveness has been a process, but I’ve been forgiven so much that it’s made it easier for me to forgive him. I don’t have to carry bitterness toward him anymore.”

When we talk about forgiving our abuser, we’re not in any way minimizing what they did to us. Nor are we dismissing it. On the contrary, forgiveness is only required where sins and offenses exist.

In Brian’s story from week five, he explains the path he chose to forgive his abusers, “Forgiving those who abused me allowed me to affirm that I was the victim and was not the one who was wrong, but wronged. Forgiving those who abused me allowed me to put closure on the pain. Although I was never able to find out why they chose to abuse me, or what might have occurred in their own lives to drive them to it, I was able to put this in God’s hands and receive healing from Him.”

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As part of this week's healing action, we encourage you to consider extending forgiveness to those who abused you. How do you do that? Here are some principles and suggestions for extending forgiveness:

1. To forgive someone who has sexually abused you, it is not necessary to communicate with that person. Often a perpetrator denies the abuse anyway, so if you were to tell them that you forgive them, they may get angry and deny it. This advice applies even if you're still in regular contact with that individual.
2. This act of forgiving your abuser is primarily for your peace of mind, not theirs. The exception to this would be the rare case in which your abuser comes to you willingly in remorse and contrition, begging your forgiveness for what they did to you.
3. One of the best ways to forgive your offender is to simply talk to God. Ask Him to help you forgive that person. Then simply tell God that you forgive them. "God, I forgive (person's name) for what they did to me. Please help me live now in a forgiven state, free from the torment of the abuse."
4. If you occasionally still see the person who abused you, be sure to maintain strict boundaries to protect yourself. Having boundaries is not only okay, but healthy. By forgiving that person, you have changed, but they may not have changed. Forgiving them does not mean that you have to trust them from now on. However, they should see love and not hate and bitterness in your treatment of them.
5. From time to time as memories of your abuse surface, you may find yourself struggling with hate and malice toward your abuser. This is natural. But remind yourself that you've forgiven them. So, you no longer have to let those

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thoughts dominate and plague your mind. Forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing. Don't feel guilty about not forgetting even after you have forgiven. But with time, those caustic feelings toward your abuser will lessen if you have forgiven them.

Both extending and receiving forgiveness are vital for your continued healing. If you have any questions or would like someone to walk with you through this process, please talk to one of your facilitators.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 6: HEALING REQUIRES BOTH RECEIVING AND EXTENDING FORGIVENESS

1. What stood out for you, or what challenges do you find in this healing action?
2. Forgiving those who abused us is often a process. Where are you in that process?
3. What is the difference between forgiving and forgetting?
4. Why is extending forgiveness so crucial to our healing?

Reclaiming My Identity

GROUP MEMBER'S STORY

1. If you shared today (tonight) how are you feeling right now?
2. In what ways has it helped the rest of you to hear this man's story?

CLOSING

1. In what way can we end on a positive note tonight?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to bring up to the group tonight?
3. In what way can we support you this week?

SESSION EIGHT

WELCOME!

Sooner or later you act out what you really believe.

— Unknown

PAUL'S STORY

Please read the following true story and reflect on the questions that follow.

I was physically and sexually abused by a family member from the time I was six years old until I was about 12. I had no idea what to do with the sexual abuse. I didn't even have a name for it. As a result of it, however, I experienced deep shame and guilt. As illogical as it seems today, I felt then like the abuse was all my fault.

Because of that shame and guilt, I've always felt like I had to super-achieve in everything I did. I never thought I could be good enough. The sexual abuse totally messed up my mind about what is normal, and what is right and wrong.

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The physical abuse gave me a high tolerance for pain, so I just stuffed that pain and the pain from sexual abuse. Everything about the sexual abuse was steeped in lies. Consequently, I had become good at lying to myself and others. I accepted others' problems and sins as my own, and even found myself covering for them.

Also, the sexual abuse had a profound effect on how I viewed myself and sexual intimacy. Anything to do with sex feels dirty, shameful, nasty, and hurtful. I also suffered from nightmares and other symptoms of PTSD.

A couple years after graduation, I married my high school sweetheart and we've been married for 43 years. But I couldn't even be intimate with my wife without feeling like I was hurting her and doing something shameful. I hated sex and what it had become to me.

Then, one day my wife and I were watching TV and Oprah came on. Oprah had survivors of childhood sexual abuse on her show. Some of the survivors were men who talked about their abuse. Suddenly, I blurted out, "Holy crap! That's me. That's what happened to me!" And that was the first time I had been able to call what happened to me "sexual abuse." It was also the first time I had shared the sexual abuse with my wife.

All those years I had been in denial. Over 50 years ago when I was abused, there was no such thing as sexual abuse (in name). Consequently, I had been afraid to tell anyone back then what the perpetrator was doing to me.

Once I knew I had been sexually abused and could put a name on it, I started looking for ways to heal. I soon discovered there was very little out there for men who had been sexually abused as children. I picked up a book by Dan Allender but found it too painful to read.

Then one day, my wife caught me looking at pornography and asked me to get help. I wasn't addicted to porn; as a matter of fact, I hated it. But I used porn to alleviate the pain of my inability to enjoy sexual intimacy. I started seeing a counselor who tried to help me with a porn addiction that I didn't have. This was very frustrating! He had no idea what I was dealing with.

SESSION EIGHT

But this incident caused me to get serious about the causes of my sexual shame. Meanwhile, Dan Allender had rewritten his book and created an online curriculum for victims of sexual abuse called, Healing the Wounded Heart. I joined an online group of five guys and found the interaction with these guys very helpful. It was good to know that I wasn't alone. It was painful to hear each other's stories and to share my own, but it helped me heal. Men who have been sexually abused are especially hesitant to share their stories, but I believe it's a necessary part of the healing process.

Victims of abuse have a hard time with forgiveness for obvious reasons. For me, the forgiveness had to start by recognizing that my abuser was the person who caused me harm. For too long I had assumed that the abuse was my fault. This was especially true given the fact that a family member was my abuser. This took time to peel back the layers of hurt and denial.

I had to hate the act of abuse and the abuser first, then forgive myself, and acknowledge it was not my fault. I had to acknowledge that my body naturally responded to the arousal of physical touch, which was also not my fault, but by God's design.

After all that hard work was done, I had to focus on real forgiveness of the abuser... in a way that didn't just sweep the abuse back below the subconscious mind. This took a lot of brave work and was especially hard for me since my abuser was no longer alive.

I've experienced a degree of healing, but still find sexual intimacy difficult. To this day, I have to encourage myself to be intimate with my wife and repeatedly tell myself that sex is good and right in marriage.

I have been uncovering the wounds a layer at a time. Healing doesn't come all at once. I've learned not to expect immediate healing. Having experienced childhood sexual abuse is like losing a limb. There's nothing you can do to reverse it. You simply have to learn to live with it to the best of your ability.

For me, knowing that God loves me and accepts me as I am is a tremendous comfort. He has taken away my guilt and shame. My identity is no longer

defined by the sexual abuse I experienced but by the fact that I am a child of God.

DISCUSS PAUL'S STORY

1. In what ways can you identify with Paul's story? What were you feeling?
2. In what ways did Paul's abuse affect him?
3. What else are you taking away from Paul's story to help you process your abuse experience?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 7: BELIEVE YOU CAN EXPERIENCE HEALING

Believing that you can experience healing is essential to your healing process. But there are some challenges to that belief you will have to face and battle along the way. Some of those challenges to believing you can experience healing include things like:

- "I fear the unknown, especially because I think I have repressed memories."
- "I've been suffering for so many years, why should I believe things will be any different now?"
- "My family still insists the abuse never happened."

SESSION EIGHT

- “I’ve already experienced so much pain! I don’t know if I can handle this.”
- “What if I’m just imagining the abuse?”
- “My life is such a mess. I don’t think there’s any hope for me.”

And you will probably encounter other questions and doubts that will challenge your belief that you can experience healing. Dr. Renee Fredrickson specializes in helping the sexually abused heal. She assures us that healing and renewal are gifts available to all.²²

Also, all the stories included in this manual demonstrate the hope and belief that anyone can find healing and recovery from sexual abuse. These men have overcome incredible odds to get where they are today—in happy, healthy relationships, and functioning well.

Many of the Healing Actions we’ve talked about can help you maintain and strengthen your belief that you can experience healing and renewal. Telling your story, engaging in community, replacing lies with truth, uncovering repressed memories, and abandoning unhealthy coping methods all aid you in your belief that healing is attainable.

Among the Healing Actions, we’ve especially found community to be significant in this regard. And think about it, when we become fearful and depressed, we generally isolate. And in our isolation, our outlook typically worsens!

Take advantage of your relationships with the men in your group. Get to know each other and spend time with each other. An ancient proverb explains:

*Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.*²³

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Another important way to keep your “belief muscle” strong is to exercise it. What we mean is, keep moving forward and journal your progress. Even if you’re only progressing incrementally at first, monitoring your progress will motivate you to keep going. And your progress will strengthen your belief that you can do this. Also, as you journal, go back to past days, weeks, and months and remember how far you’ve come.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 7: BELIEVE YOU CAN EXPERIENCE HEALING

1. To what extent do you believe you can be healed?
2. Consider the scale below:
1 = “I remain a victim” and 10 = “I am a victorious survivor.”

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

On that scale of 1 to 10, where would you say you are in the healing process? What does a victorious survivor look like for you?

3. We strategically call this curriculum *Reclaiming My Identity*. What connection do you see between experiencing healing and reclaiming your identity?

CLOSING

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

Even though we're at the end of this eight-week program, there are many other actions you can take to continue your healing process. We readily admit that *Reclaiming My Identity* most likely represents just one element of your healing. Below are some other things to consider, choose one or more and keep moving forward. Don't lose the momentum and the ground that you've gained during these last eight weeks.

- Make an appointment to see a counselor, especially if you suspect that you have repressed memories or suffer from dissociation. Make sure that the counselor you find has expertise in those areas. Your facilitators may be able to refer you to such a counselor.
- Consider asking one or more of the men in your group to meet with you weekly as a confidant. Keep journaling your progress and share your joys and struggles with each other. Hold each other accountable and support one another.
- You may wish to go through another 8-week *Reclaiming My Identity* experience with a different group of men. Healing from sexual abuse often occurs "in layers," so you may find it helpful to go through this experience again with different men.
- Talk with your facilitators, share with them where you are in your progress and ask them to suggest other possible next steps.
- In Russ' story, he found great help in reading the Bible to learn how to grow closer to God. If you don't own a Bible,

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we can get one for you, you can order one on Amazon, or you can download a free Bible app on your phone. Your facilitators may be able to provide some helpful suggestions in this regard.

- If you would like to hear more about God and Jesus Christ, please let us know and we can provide additional resources and opportunities for you.

Thank you for being a part of this 8-week experience with us. No doubt your being here has contributed greatly to the healing of all in your group!

APPENDIX A:

DISSOCIATION & SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE

DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is another defense mechanism in which the trauma was so horrific that the brain assigns those incidents to alter-personalities or one mentally retreats to a different place so that the individual may continue to function on some level of normalcy. Dissociation is not a mental illness. Treatment for both repression and dissociation often requires the expertise of a trained therapist who is proficient in those areas.

Jasmine was raised on a farm in rural Canada. She grew up with her mom and dad, a sister who was 16 years older, a brother 14 years older, and a brother who was three years younger. Her older sister left home while Jasmine was still very young, so when her older brother became engaged, Jasmine had hopes for a healthy relationship with an older sister in her sister-in-law-to-be.

To Jasmine's joy, her soon-to-be sister-in-law invited her to go out with her one evening. As they held hands, little four-year-old Jasmine felt all warm inside. But when they arrived at their destination, Jasmine experienced such horrific trauma, that her mind dissociated those events to enable her to survive them.

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Jasmine explains:

It wouldn't be until my late 20s or early 30s that I began to remember what happened to me that night and many nights thereafter. Due to the trauma of those events, my mind had retreated to a coping mechanism called dissociation. Dissociation is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing of it enabled me to live my life without feeling traumatized all the time. The curse of dissociation I would learn about much later in life.

Because of her dissociation, Jasmine experienced night terrors, nightmares, paralyzing fear, panic attacks, and serious health issues for decades to come. She was plagued with unexplained physical and emotional problems and often thought she was going crazy.

But when Jasmine was finally able to recall what had happened to her, her story was so bizarre and horrific that we hesitated to include it in this curriculum. *Would anyone believe her story?* However, after researching the matter thoroughly, we discovered that this form of sexual abuse is far more common than we thought. But by its very nature it tends to be even more secretive than incest.

Jasmine tells her chilling story:

One night, my sister-in-law took me on an outing. She was holding my hand as we walked into a building. But once inside the room, she let go of my hand and the 13 people who were gathered there took over. I was to be my sister-in-law's "virgin sacrifice" in a witch coven that she wanted to join. As the rituals proceeded, the horrified look on her face told me that she did not realize what it meant to have me as her "entry fee" to the coven.

They stripped me naked and laid me on a table and pronounced curses over me. They began a total and thorough abuse of my body, soul and spirit. Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) is more than just

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sexual, emotional or physical abuse it is also spiritual. I felt its attack in every fiber of my being.

They abused me sexually and repeatedly in unspeakable ways. They wore terrifying masks and poked, prodded, and tortured me with needles and other sharp instruments. They did this all the while speaking demonic chants over me to prevent me from remembering these events in the future. They used terms I was familiar with from the Bible, but they used them in a twisted, counterfeit, mocking way.

I was numb with fear. Every fiber of my being was traumatized—physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. They prevented me from crying or making any other sounds by threatening me with torture and retribution. They starved me and kept me from drinking, so I wouldn't have any fluids in my body to discharge while under their control.

I was forced to be completely subjected to them and open to every whim of their abuse. If I didn't obey them, they would torture me. They showed no mercy. They threatened me and there were other children. I was forced to watch as they committed horrible atrocities to those children.

Each ritual and covenant I went through was designed to kill, steal, and destroy my soul. They now "owned" me, and I became subject to their abuses repeatedly over a long period of time. In fact, they made it clear to me that I now belonged to Satan. The more pain they inflicted in numerous ways, the greater the opportunity to cause me to dissociate. They drove me to dissociation intentionally to prevent me from associating these tortures with myself. In this way, they would be free from fear of being found out.

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God is so kind to create the brain with the capacity to freeze when faced with death-threatening torture. I am grateful that I was able to dissociate and freeze and collapse under severe torture – it spared my life in some ways. Sure, I have to overcome the memories and patterns of coping now – but God also made the brain plastic so that I can learn new ways of coping that are different from what I had to use back then. When I reflect on how far I have come, and how much change God has accomplished in me, I praise God with my whole being!

Alan Redpath once said, “God will take you through if you can stand the pull!” So, I hung onto God and let Him pull me through when I had no strength or courage of my own to take the next step on the journey to recovery. And God proved faithful every time I dared to trust Him!

Jasmine’s recovery came slowly over a long period of time. She doesn’t know how she would have made it without Jesus Christ in her life. Today, she is experiencing a productive life as she works as a licensed professional counselor who specializes in helping women recover from trauma and sexual abuse. In her late 50s now, Jasmine is still single and continues to confront alternate personalities from time to time.

If you have repressed memories and/or dissociation, these were necessary to protect you during your trauma. But because those memories were inaccessible, you have unresolved grief. Recalling those repressed memories allows you to fully grieve what happened to you. Grieving hurts and is messy. Grieving is not sequential, nor does it follow a given pattern. And sometimes grieving takes considerable time. But after you have sufficiently grieved, you can experience closure and move on with your life.

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- 23 Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, *New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation.

