

Victims No More
Participant Manual
Version 3



www.srtservices.org



Victims No More

PARTICIPANT MANUAL

Version 3

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& Rob Fischer

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Foreword

You're no doubt wondering why a man would write a curriculum for women who have suffered sexual abuse or sexual assault. For me, it began over 35 years ago when my wife and I left our two young children in the care of two male babysitters who were teenage brothers. We returned home that night, I paid the babysitters and took them home. But when I got home, my wife and children were still awake and deep in a serious conversation.

That night we discovered that these two teen boys had sexually molested our little girl. I was extremely angry, incredulous (for these were the sons of a co-worker whom I knew and trusted) and I had overwhelming feelings of hurt on behalf of our four-year-old 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, urgently. I drove back across town and met with him in my car, describing what his boys had done. He was a man of honor; he believed me and was ashamed and horrified by his sons' behavior.

He called his sons to face me and I asked them whether they had molested my daughter. Knowing they had been caught, they admitted

their guilt. Their father then imposed disciplinary consequences on them and I told them that we could no longer trust them as babysitters or in other situations with our children.

Added to our personal story, I have served as a pastor for over 25 years and have listened to the stories of many women and men 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.

Since its inception, I've served on the board of directors for SRT Services . As a professional writer, I was asked to write the curriculum for SAVAnon. I interviewed the women whose stories are included in this book and wept as each of them shared the pain of their experiences.

I've been married to the same woman, Linda, for over 40 years. We have three children, lost a fourth through miscarriage, and have ten wonderful grandchildren. I am passionate about helping women and men who have suffered sexual abuse or assault on their journey toward healing.

Despite all I've shared above, you might still find me an unlikely candidate to write a curriculum such as this, so I must humbly request your understanding. I could not have written this without the help of the women whose stories are recorded in this work. In addition, Cindy Crawford, Laurel Bahr, and Lisa Cinq-Mars spent many hours poring over the curriculum to ensure its relevance and effectiveness for women like them who have experienced sexual abuse.

Because this curriculum is the joint work of these women and me, in many cases I've chosen to identify with you using the plural personal pronoun "we." Please accept my attempt to draw myself into your experience in this way.

Foreword

We invite you to fully enter into this curriculum and the eight sessions you'll spend with other women 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!

— *Rob Fischer, September 2018*



Victims No More

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Version 3



Session One

WELCOME

_____ 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
- Where you are from

- What would you like to take away from your experience over the next eight weeks?

OVER THE NEXT EIGHT WEEKS, WE WILL TALK ABOUT

- Your story of sexual abuse or assault
- How those experiences may have affected your life
- 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. This should include participating at a private location where no one can be overheard.
- **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 and being

Session One

ready to share your insights. If you have to leave the group, please explain why, so others are not left with the possibility of having been the reason.

- **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.
- **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 needs is by comparing ourselves to someone else or trying to fix them.
- **Embrace your unique story** – Resist comparing your experiences with those of the other women in your group. Let each woman'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 disturbing or too strange to be true. All the stories printed in this curriculum are factual.
- **"Check-ins"** – Allow each other to check-in and ensure we're okay through any pain the healing process may prompt.
- **No "sharing hangovers"** – Promise not to regret what we've shared with each other.
- **Always try to end on a positive note.**
- **What else** would you like to set down as a group norm?

INTRODUCTION – *Victims No More*

Welcome! We are so glad you've chosen to join us for this eight-week support group 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 women.

All the facilitators come with our own stories of sexual abuse or assault and are in various stages of healing. We are all volunteers.

We recognize that although there are some basic issues that we all encounter, or need to face, each woman processes her 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 different outcomes than we're currently experiencing. Please avail yourself of every method and opportunity that we provide to help facilitate your desired change.

SAVAnon is part of SRT Services and is an independent organization, unaffiliated with any particular organized religion, denomination or faith. SAVAnon exists to create awareness regarding the emotional harm caused by sexual abuse or assault and offer a path toward healing for those affected. Anyone who has experienced sexual abuse or assault, whether they claim religious beliefs or not, is welcome to join our gender-specific programs.

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

Please be aware that as you read the stories of abuse contained in this manual and as you hear each other's stories, past trauma may be triggered or repressed memories may surface. You may find this experience very painful, but some pain is necessary for healing. So please lean in, continue with us, and share what you're feeling as you are able. Remember, you are not alone!

DISCLAIMER

We recognize that every person is different and your situation is 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 gain some measure of healing through this 8-week program.

Our facilitators are not professional counselors or life coaches. They are volunteers with their own stories of sexual abuse or assault and have received 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. 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 appropriate agency. Pursuing justice could promote your healing and possibly prevent the offender from abusing others.

If you are actively harming yourself or having suicidal thoughts, please seek the help of a professional counselor immediately. This support group is not intended to replace professional counseling or therapy. We can discreetly help you locate a counselor if you like. You can find a comprehensive list of resources, including 24/7 hotlines, at srtsservices.org/resources.

HOW THE PARTICIPANT MANUAL WORKS

Each week has pre-work that you will complete prior to the next session. For instance, if you turn to Session Two on page 13 in your Participant Manual, you'll see that after reviewing our group norms and hearing a facilitator's story, it begins with Jenny's Story, followed by some discussion questions and then a short reading. At the end of sessions 2 through 8, you will find a journal page. Feel free to use this space or journal your thoughts and emotions in a separate notebook.

Most of the sessions also contain healing action steps. 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. Over 300,000 people in the United States experience rape or sexual

assault each year,¹ and nine out of ten of those abused are female. This translates to one out of every six American women who have experienced rape or attempted rape in her lifetime.² These numbers are shocking and such violence should never occur.

According to childtrauma.org, by the age of 18, one in three females and one in five males have been victims of sexual abuse,³ and ninety-three percent know their abuser.⁴ Many of these perpetrators are in positions of trust, such as family members, teachers, clergy or coaches.⁵

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 experts agree sexual abuse is never only about sex. Instead, it is often an attempt to gain power over others.⁶

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 person, or photographic exploitation. Voyeurism, or watching a someone undress or shower, also constitutes sexual abuse.

1 Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2010-2014 (2015).

2 www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence.

3 Susanne Babble, PhD, MFT, "Trauma: Childhood Sexual Abuse," Psychology Today, March 12, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/somatic-psychology/201303/trauma-childhood-sexual-abuse>.

4 U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement. 2000.

5 www.rainn.org/articles/adult-survivors-child-sexual-abuse.

6 GoodTherapy.org, "Sexual Assault/Abuse," 9/6/2018, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/sexual-abuse>.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Sexual exploitation refers to the exchange of sex or sexual acts for drugs, food, shelter, money, protection, or other basics of life. Creating pornographic or sexually explicit websites is sexual exploitation, as is using technology to request or publicize compromising photographs or data.

Sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, 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

Sexual abuse can cause lifelong damage to the individual with symptoms that are varied, but universally common. Victims of sexual abuse often express feeling violated and that their bodies no longer belong to them. Many experience guilt, blaming themselves for the abuse, and some may have suffered physical injuries. When not addressed, the trauma of their abuse can create difficulties with careers and relationships.⁷

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

7 Renee Fredrickson, PhD, *Repressed Memories—A Journey to Recovery from Sexual Abuse* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 29.

Session One

- 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

When children experience 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. Often, if they do tell an adult, the adult may not believe the child or in some cases, simply dismiss the abuse due to their own fear. Children may also feel a tremendous sense of loss, which they cannot properly account for.

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.⁸ Some of the possible symptoms of PTSD resulting from sexual abuse include:

- Suicidal tendencies
- Withdrawal from and mistrust or fear of adults and authority figures

8 Susanne Babble, PhD, MFT, "Trauma: Childhood Sexual Abuse," Psychology Today, March 12, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/somatic-psychology/201303/trauma-childhood-sexual-abuse>.

- 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
- Lesbian lifestyle
- Prostitution
- Depression
- Sexually abusing other 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.”⁹ They may experience emotional or physical responses triggered by something associated with the abuse, but they may not understand why.

9 Dr. Jim Hopper, “Recovered Memories of Sexual Abuse,” nd, <https://www.jimhopper.com/child-abuse/recovered-memories/>.

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

Dissociation is a survival skill that occurs when the trauma is so horrific the brain disconnects from the event and the world around you. This can include, but is not limited to, daydreaming, highway hypnosis, "getting lost" in a book or movie, or assigning traumatic incidents to alternate personalities so the individual may continue to function on some level of normalcy. This can happen during daily activities, including during sexual intimacy. Although some of the women'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.

FACILITATOR STORY

There is great healing in sharing our stories of sexual abuse in a supportive, non-judgmental environment. As facilitators, we want to take that vulnerable step first and model what we will be asking you to do. So today, your facilitator will be sharing her story. It can be hard for even a facilitator to share her story, so, as you listen, please try to concentrate on supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Some of you may be thinking, "I've been trying to put my sexual abuse behind me. Why would I want to revisit that experience? I just want to move on 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.

Victims No More

In the following seven weeks of *Victims No More*, 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 women find tremendous relief in discovering they are not alone, and that healing and regaining their dignity and love for life is possible.

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please complete the tasks outlined below before our next session. This exercise is for your eyes only, so be completely honest with yourself.

1. Self-assessment. Please take a few minutes and go over the two lists of symptoms found in this chapter on pages 8-10. 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 Healing Action 1: Acknowledge the Abuse. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week.
3. We'll meet for seven more weeks at _____ (time).

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

REVIEW OF GROUP NORMS

- **Keep confidences** – What we say here stays here. We pledge to keep confidences and ask the same of each member of the group. This should include participating at a private location where no one can be overheard.
- **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 and being ready to share your insights. If you have to leave the group, please explain why, so others are not left with the possibility of having been the reason.

- **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.
- **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 needs is by comparing ourselves to someone else or trying to fix them.
- **Embrace your unique story** – Resist comparing your experiences with those of the other women in your group. Let each woman'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 disturbing or too strange to be true. All the stories printed in this curriculum are factual.
- **"Check-ins"** – Allow each other to check-in and ensure we're okay through any pain the healing process may prompt.
- **No "sharing hangovers"** – Promise not to regret what we've shared with each other.
- **Always try to end on a positive note.**
- **Anything else we added.**

FACILITATOR STORY

Today we will be talking about writing your story. There is great healing in sharing our stories of sexual abuse in a supportive, non-judgmental environment. As facilitators, we want to take that vulnerable step first and model what we will be asking you to do. So today, your facilitator will be sharing her story. It can be hard for even a facilitator to share her story, so, as you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

JENNY'S STORY

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

My mom lived a wild life. She spent a night with a man she met on a bus and I was the product of that union. So, my biological father wasn't in the picture at all while I was growing up. I didn't even know who he was until many years later. I was raised by my mom and her boyfriend, Ted.

Ted began abusing me physically when I was two or three. Back then, he would beat me—often just for doing the things a toddler does, like dirtying my pants. One time, he beat me in a public bathroom at a gas station. Witnesses reported him. The police found out this wasn't the only time and he went to jail. Mom was pregnant with my younger brother at the time.

Ted spent his time in jail and obediently attended anger-management classes. So, when he got out of jail, Mom was convinced that he had changed. She wanted their relationship to work, so she took him back. (They eventually married when I was about 12 years old.)

My older brother, Daniel, was only 15 at the time, but he had left home and had gone to live with my mom's brother (my uncle) and his family. Years later, I found out that Daniel had moved out because he couldn't stand to see Ted beat me. Ted was a big guy and my brother felt bad he couldn't protect me.

Due to the violence and other issues at home, the state had threatened my mom numerous times that she could lose custody of her kids. My uncle and aunt offered to take us in, but my younger brother and I stayed at home with Mom. When Ted came back home after jail, his parole forbade him to discipline me, but Ted devised other ways to abuse me.

My earliest memory of Ted sexually abusing me was when I was six. And for the next seven years, Ted sexually violated me in more ways and encounters than I could count. He did unspeakable things to me and made me participate in sexual acts that left me feeling dirty, soiled and ashamed.

I was deathly afraid of him. He was a master manipulator. He snuck around doing all this behind my mom's back. She knew nothing of it. His mind was twisted.

When I was 13, I went to the community pool one day and the police showed up and asked me to go with them. I couldn't figure out what had precipitated this, because I hadn't told anyone what Ted was doing to me. The police took me home and the officer interviewed me in the presence of Ted and Mom. The officer asked me specifically whether Ted had ever done this or that to me. But I was scared to death of Ted and feared that they'd take me away from my mom if I admitted those things, so I lied.

Years later, my mom told me that my cousin had told her dad and mom (my uncle and aunt) that Ted had fondled her, and they were convinced that he was sexually abusing me, too. Had I only known that at the time I might have acted differently, and the authorities would have investigated

Session Two

Ted. But I was too afraid that I would never see my mom or siblings again if the truth was told.

That incident with the police must have scared Ted, because I don't have any more memories of sexual abuse after that. But Ted continued to do disgusting and perverted things. He often snooped around in my bedroom.

By the time I entered high school, I hated Ted, who was now my step-dad. If I had had a gun, I could probably have killed him. I was so angry at him. He made me feel so ashamed. I felt dirty, unclean, violated, unworthy, like trash. I didn't want anyone to know what was beneath the surface of my life, so I compensated for this by seeking perfection in everything I did.

Consequently, I excelled at everything. I earned top grades, did well in sports and became the student body president. Although I had never struggled with a weight problem, I was overly self-conscious about my appearance as well and began starving myself. It wasn't long before I found myself struggling with anorexia and bulimia.

I was addicted to my eating disorders. I would vomit 13 times a day. I was caught in a perpetual cycle of bingeing and purging. I was in bondage to this addiction, chained to these habits for years. I remember thinking that I will never be able to enjoy a simple meal again. I had no freedom.

I can't blame Ted for my poor choices, but what he did to me warped my sense of reality. My childhood had been ripped from me. I just wanted to be a little girl playing in the park with girlfriends and dolls. Instead, I always felt so dirty and ashamed of who I was and so I tried to hide any hint of imperfection.

In college, I met my husband, Rick. He was not like other men. Rick was kind and loving. Instead of using and abusing me, he honored me, loved me and protected me. I confessed to Rick about my bulimia and he stood by me.

Finally, over a period of about nine months, I was able to gradually let go of my eating disorders. But it was a battle. I'd make progress, then relapse and start again, but eventually I found freedom from it.

Rick and I got married two years after we met. But about six months into our marriage, I broke. Because of the sexual abuse I had experienced for so many years as a child, my view of sex was warped, and I was struggling with intimacy in our marriage.

Intellectually, I knew that God's design for sex within marriage is something beautiful and holy, but I couldn't wrap my heart around it. I needed to reprogram my mind and body with truth.

Rick and I were poor college students at the time and couldn't afford counseling, so our church offered to pay for my counseling. I went to a counselor every week for 18 months. My counselor helped me process the abuse and helped me grow.

In counseling, for the first time I realized that I had blamed myself for all that had happened to me. As a result, I had been stuck as a victim, but I so wanted to be victorious! My counselor helped me see that Ted was responsible, not me! I was not to blame! Understanding this was a crucial element in gaining victory over my childhood sexual abuse.

Another significant piece of my healing that helped me gain victory was forgiveness. Because others had extended forgiveness to me, I felt compelled to forgive Ted. When I forgave Ted, it does NOT mean that what he did is now somehow okay. What he did was awful. My forgiving him also doesn't mean that I want a relationship with him. For obvious reasons, I've chosen not to establish contact or a relationship with him. I don't trust Ted. I know that this plays out differently for other women who have been abused, but that's how I've chosen to move forward.

Forgiveness is a very powerful weapon in the hands of the victim. When we as a victim offer forgiveness, this puts us in control and removes

Session Two

control from the perpetrator. Someone has said that withholding forgiveness is like taking poison and hoping the other person will die. Had I not forgiven Ted, I would still be the victim.

Through counseling, God helped me view Rick the right way. I knew he would never hurt me. And being intimate with Rick is pure and right. It angers me that something so sacred and beautiful as sex in marriage had become so warped and twisted. Thankfully, its intended beauty in my life and in our marriage has been restored.

DISCUSS JENNY'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Jenny's story?
2. In what ways did Jenny's abuse affect her?
3. In what ways has your abuse affected you?
4. What are you taking away from Jenny's story to help you process your trauma?

Note: All the women 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 healthier ways. By including the positive outcomes 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.

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

We will introduce all seven actions this week but only focus on 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. Healing requires forgiveness.
7. Believe you can experience healing.

In this session, 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 to hide it any longer. Some of you may have already acknowledged your abuse to others, and the fact that you are in this group indicates that you're already moving in the direction of healing.

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 that we've included other women's stories in the reading for each week.

Sexual abuse or assault leaves a woman feeling like a victim. Indeed, you were victimized. But as long as a victim remains a victim, she is 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 might find it shameful or dirty.
- You don't want others to know about it.
- You feel guilty.
- 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 live through the pain of your abuse again.
- You may be afraid of threats or other repercussions from sharing.
- You might think what happened to you is not serious enough to be called abuse.
- You may feel that your story is too extreme to be believed.

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 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 to carefully choose with whom, when, and where to share your story. And we want to assure you that this group is a safe place to tell your story.

While all those reasons for silence 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 can torment you. What is acknowledged and brought into the light can no longer haunt you.

Session Two

However, if your abuse occurred in your family, be aware that by telling your family about it, they may see your honesty as betrayal, 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, loved and protected.

Dr. Renee Fredrickson is a psychotherapist who specializes in helping women 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."¹⁰

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 like the pain is too raw or overwhelming. Throughout this 8-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 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 mar-
ring your current life."¹¹*

10 Renee Fredrickson, PhD, *Repressed Memories—A Journey to Recovery from Sexual Abuse* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 18.

11 Renee Fredrickson, PhD, p. 26.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 1: ACKNOWLEDGE THE ABUSE

Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

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?

HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY

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. Most participants find it helpful to write their story down with the length being between 20 and 30 minutes. Focus on the sexual abuse, sharing what led to the abuse, what happened to you, and the effects of your abuse on your life. Refrain from being overly graphic, but don't soften the language you use to describe your abuse. For example, if you were raped, feel free to use that explicit term rather than a euphemism like, "He had his way with me."

Session Two

Below are some questions you may want to consider to help you prepare your story:

1. How old were you when you were first abused?
2. Who was it that abused you?
3. What was the frequency and time span of your abuse?
4. Describe the emotions you felt when the abuse was happening.
5. Did you report the abuse and what response did you get when you reported it?

Victims No More

6. In what ways has your abuse impacted your life?

7. Describe the emotions you've experienced resulting from your abuse.

8. What measures have helped you so far in your healing process?

Record the schedule for sharing stories below:

SESSION	DATE	PARTICIPANT
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Session Three—Tara’s story and Healing Action 2: Healing Occurs in Community. Respond to the corresponding questions and come ready to share your responses during our group meeting next week. Start your journal.

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 here, 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

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

GROUP MEMBER STORY

We want to take time to allow each of you to share your story in a safe, caring environment. Each week, a member of our group will share her story. Today we will be hearing our first story from one of our group members. As you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story

we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

TARA'S STORY

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

I grew up in a home in which my parents had what I thought was an ideal marriage—a marriage to live by. But when it came to light that my mom had had an affair, my parents divorced. Their divorce was long and drawn out. It was very painful and rocked the foundations of all that I had held dear. After all, my parents were Christians and even worked as missionaries. Affairs and divorce were not part of that worldview. To make matters worse, my mom found out she was pregnant during the divorce.

Wanting to retain my relationship with my mom, I forgave her for what she had done. But this angered my dad so much that he totally rejected me. He was very angry and hurt and took it out on me. He also turned to alcohol and eventually became an alcoholic.

Dad started verbally abusing me, saying things that were hurtful and damaging. He'd say things like, "You're going to end up a whore just like your mom!" He called me worthless and told me I'd never know who I am. The seeds he planted in me damaged my soul and self-worth beyond description.

During the lengthy divorce proceedings, I attended a church camp. There, we went through some deep training and were urged to confess our sins to each other. I was only 13 or 14 at the time and at that age we had neither the wisdom nor the filters to know what would damage another person. As a result, the guys at the camp, who greatly outnumbered the girls, came to me one-by-one, confessing that they had lusted after me.

Session Three

I didn't know what to do with that information. I was naïve and didn't understand a boy's mind. It made me feel very bad, dirty, and sinful as though I was the cause of whatever it was they were struggling with. These feelings seemed to give credence to all the abusive things my dad had been saying about me.

When I returned from camp, my parents' divorce was final.

That fall, I entered high school. I was desperate for approval and hoped I'd find it there. I tried out for cheerleading and became the captain of the squad. I worked very hard at school and got good grades. I was a perfectionist, hungry for affirmation and self-worth.

Meanwhile, our cheerleading coach didn't like the way some of us looked and required that we keep a journal of everything we ate. To keep us accountable, we had to show her our journals regularly. I found this very embarrassing, so I just stopped eating and soon became anorexic. I knew what I was doing was wrong and self-destructive, but I didn't know how to extract myself from it. Soon, I developed serious physical problems due to my anorexia.

Also, during this time, guys would make lewd remarks, obscene gestures and grab me. Although their treatment bothered me greatly, it dovetailed with the other lies I had believed and it became "normal" in my life.

Then I began dating a guy named Troy. He was the son of a minister, so I thought he would be safe. He was on the wrestling team and very strong. When we first started dating, I told him what I would and wouldn't do physically, and together we agreed not to have sex.

But soon, Troy became very emotionally abusive toward me. He held things over me. Despite his father's profession as a minister, it became apparent to me that Troy hated Christians. I began to see glimpses of his dark, terrifying home life.

After a while, his verbal and emotional abuse escalated to physical abuse. I'd beg him to stop. I felt emotionally dead. One time we were at his house and his parents were gone. He held me down in such a way that I couldn't move and I thought my neck would break. I was so afraid! Silently, I begged God to take me as Troy raped me.

About then, Troy's mom came home and saw what he was doing. She yelled at him and he released me. I ran out of the house crying and started walking home. Troy's dad came after me in the car and asked me to get in and that he would take me home. Troy's dad began telling me all the reasons that I needed to forgive Troy and chalked up his behavior to bad childhood experiences. But then he insinuated that it was my fault for leading their son astray in the first place.

The next day, Troy came to my house and apologized for his actions and swore it would never happen again. But it did. He began threatening me and my family. He said he'd burn our house down if I didn't comply. Once again, he caught me outside our house. He backed me up against the house in a choke hold and raped me again. I felt so helpless and began thinking this was my fault, so what was the use? I cried out to God, begging Him to help me.

Around this time, I suffered a mild heart attack due to the anorexia. My mom sent me away to live with my grandma for a month to recover. Grandma started nursing me, getting me back on track physically and emotionally. As my health improved, I decided I wanted Troy completely out of my life. I never wanted to see him again.

But while I was at Grandma's, somehow Troy tracked me down and called. She didn't know who it was, so she handed me the phone and it was Troy. He told me all the things he was going to do to me. I was too naïve at the time to know about reporting him.

After a month, I left my grandma with much improved health and went back home to my mom and step-dad. One day, I was home alone and

Session Three

suddenly, there was Troy. He had snuck into our home! He muscled me down onto the floor of the bedroom and started raping me again. But Mom and her husband came home and caught him. My step-dad grabbed him by the neck and threw him against the wall.

However, Troy continued stalking me, even though I kept telling him adamantly that it was over. I was working at a daycare at the time and he would even harass me there until the daycare had a restraining order placed on him. But he still found ways to slip notes into my car and pester me. He would say lewd and crass things, telling me he knew I wanted it. This was like a suspense horror movie come true.

Around this time, I started dating a childhood friend of mine named Jason. Jason was tender, sweet and loving. He was genuine. He protected me and honored me. He was everything I would ever wish for in a man. He was attending college in another town, while I was in college in my hometown.

One night, I went to my college to attend a night class. But when I got there, everything looked dark. I went inside and there was no one there. Apparently, I had not gotten the message that the class had been canceled. I was walking down a dark hall and came to an intersecting hall. I looked down the hall and there was Troy coming toward me!

I kept my composure and continued walking out of the building. I started walking toward my car, but then broke into a run. He started chasing me and caught me, dragging me into the front seat of his truck. But this time I fought him off and was able to get to my car and get home.

At home, I called the police and gave a report. They arrested Troy, but his dad had connections and got him out of jail.

Eventually, Jason and I got married. But as we were leaving on our honeymoon, there was Troy driving toward us in his truck. He continued stalking me for years, threatening me crudely and graphically.

Many don't understand the tie that exists between two people when they have sex, even if it was unwanted. All those years I had taken ownership for all the abuse, thinking that it was my fault somehow. That mindset drove me to want to hide it and filled me with a false sense of guilt.

Today, I am happily married to Jason, the love of my life and we have two beautiful children.

DISCUSS TARA'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Tara's story?
2. In what ways did Tara's abuse affect her?
3. What are you taking away from Tara's story to help you process your trauma?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 2: HEALING OCCURS IN COMMUNITY

The majority of those who have been sexually abused know their attackers. Their abusers are often family members or authority figures in their lives. This makes sexual abuse especially horrible and deeply damaging because it usually occurs in the context of relationships that we trust.

Session Three

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 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 women who understand, empathize and stand with you in this program.

If you were sexually abused as a child, your childhood, virginity, and innocence 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. Either way, 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 like Jenny. 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.

There are so many ways people experience and express grief. 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 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 love 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 love you. In this way, despite your own pain, you are assisting in the healing of all the 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. Embrace each other warmly and with abandon. 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

In Session 2, we discussed Healing Action 1: Acknowledge the Abuse. This week, you read about the second Healing Action: Healing Occurs in Community, referencing betrayal and grief. Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

Session Three

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?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Session Four—Brilynn’s story and Healing Action 3: Replace the Lies with Truth. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week. Continue journaling.

My Journal



Session Four

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

GROUP MEMBER STORY

We want to take time to allow each of you to share your story in a safe, caring environment. Each week, a member of our group will share her story. As you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

BRILYNN'S STORY

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

My story begins with the lies I absorbed during my childhood. I grew up in a Christian home where my parents were married and loved us; everything from the outside looked like a healthy home. It was made to look this way by parents who needed to maintain control of everything in the family, protecting us from anything they deemed bad. The "bad" list included alcohol consumption of any kind, behaving in a "non-Christian way," and sex outside of marriage. We were told that if we were to engage in sex before marriage, we would be forever tainted and our future husbands would think less of us. Anything that could provide a path to premarital sex, such as any sexual curiosity, was categorized as "bad."

Fear of God was used in our home to control behavior. I learned to view God as "The Boogie Man"; if I didn't behave in a faultlessly proper manner, he would reject me. The Bible verse that was assigned to me and posted everywhere in my home once I discovered pornography during puberty says, "Only think of things that are right, lovely, pure or admirable." This confused me. As puberty surged, my body responded naturally to physical stimulation, but I was made to believe that those natural occurrences were bad. I had no one to talk with about it, so I took on the belief that I was fundamentally wrong, gross, impure, and someone to be looked down upon.

My sense of self-disgust was reinforced by the way my mother compared me to my siblings and tried to force me to be like them. Her disapproval of me increased my feelings of isolation, and the unanswered questions I had about sex burrowed inward and transformed into a growing shame monster. Even as a child, it was hard to know the boundaries of appropriate play. I remember one time playing house with a friend and wanting to pursue my feelings of arousal when we put my little brother's diapers on ourselves.

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Another item on the “bad” list was the expression of certain emotions, especially anger. Anger was definitely never acceptable, and, like anything else on this list, never to be discussed. Although we looked like a happy, healthy family, I was incredibly lonely. My dad was physically present and provided for us financially, but he never engaged with us kids. When he was home he was hiding away in another room, away from us. My mom would say, “Give your daughter a hug,” and my dad and I would embrace in an awkward hug. To this day, a hug from my father is awkward and confusing.

Yet my mom would demand hugs from me after punishing me for expressing my strong feelings of anger or injustice. I had no idea what healthy intimacy looked like. Basically, if my mom didn’t like how I was acting or a feeling I was having, I was told I was wrong and should act and feel a different way, convincing me that there was something wrong with me as a person. I grew up feeling starved to be known and held, but I believed I was dirty, sexual, and a disruption to how the world works.

As soon as I figured out how easy boys were to manipulate into sexual activities to get what felt like positive physical touch, I was willing to do whatever they wanted so I could feel desired and be touched intimately by another person who wanted me close. I tried to always have a boyfriend so I wouldn’t feel lonely and was known in school for being easy. Girls in high school wanted to have nothing to do with me, but the boys were approachable because I felt like I had what they wanted. I was constantly criticized by my family for being boy-crazy and the purity movement was shoved down my throat.

My virginity became a burden to me, something I didn’t feel worthy of having. I knew I would eventually lose it anyway, so I actively sought to get rid of it. I remember propositioning two different older boys at my high school to take my virginity from me with no strings attached. I just didn’t want it anymore. I didn’t feel like I deserved the purity that came with being a virgin. I eventually lost my virginity to a boy in high school

who made sure to announce it to the school. My sense of shame and dirtiness multiplied, and my low human worth was confirmed.

My hyper-sexual behavior continued into young adulthood because it was the most successful way to never be alone and to get the closest thing to intimacy. When I was 20, I met a military guy who was about 5 years older than me, who instantly gave me the attention I craved. He seemed like a nice guy so I gave him my number and we met for coffee. I'm not sure how many dates we went on after that, but I know we had been having sex with each other by the time I was raped.

My memory of that specific night is still really hazy. We were hanging out in his barracks and wanting to drink or get even more drunk than we already were. He suggested going to his friend's room because he knew his friend would have alcohol. Sure enough, the guy had weed and booze waiting for us. We drank and smoked together and later that night my boyfriend and I started having sex on his buddy's bed. The friend asked if he could join in and my boyfriend said it was up to me. I agreed and we continued with a threesome. It's all pretty fuzzy, but at some point, his friend asked if I was okay because it looked like I was blacking out. I said I was fine.

I have a very clear, brief memory of me lying naked in a shower, the water splashing against my face as I stared at the green tiles, trying to force myself to stop breathing so I could die and end what felt like living in absolute horror. Then I remember waking up in the morning on the hard ground, feeling weak and sickly, completely naked in a mess of my own damp vomit with my boyfriend by my side.

The next thing I knew, his friend was picking me up under my arms and dragging me onto his bed. I let him at first because I was barely coherent until I realized that he was going to try to have sex with me. I told him no. I remembered what had happened the night before, but this felt different. I didn't want to have sex with him if my boyfriend, the guy I felt loyal

Session Four

to, wasn't a part of it. He just said, "Shhh, it's ok," and proceeded to rape me. I just lay there, feeling dead all over. I wasn't me anymore. I don't understand why I didn't fight him. One of my greatest qualities is being a fighter, but for some reason, that morning I had nothing. I felt that I had been reduced to a fleshy body and my spirit was gone.

What has always confused me is that after the rape, I kept seeing him for sex for weeks. The sex was very degrading but he made me feel wanted in some weird way, even though he would force me to say things like, "I am a dirty whore." Until I processed that night with my counselor, I didn't understand why I kept going back to him. We discovered that because my self-worth was so low, this was what I thought I deserved. I believed I was a disgusting person to be used for a man's pleasure, so why wouldn't someone treat me like that?

I just told myself it was a night of bad decisions, that I was at fault, and tried to move on. But I couldn't move on. I began having episodes where I would get black-out drunk and have screaming fits, refusing to let anyone touch me. I would wildly scream that I was raped, which was odd because at that point in time, I didn't actually believe I had been raped. Then I would often find myself in the shower having a panic attack, and in my barely conscious state, I would try to stop my breathing so I could die and end the horror.

One such episode occurred in front of my parents, but they have never made an attempt to discover what happened to me. Now that I am a mother of my own daughter, it breaks my heart that my parents didn't allow themselves to feel angry at the possibility that their daughter was abused. It felt like the unspoken messages I had always received from them that I was dirty, a bad person who only makes poor choices and didn't deserve better, were confirmed. If my own parents didn't believe I was mistreated, then I deserved what came my way and it must have been my fault.

The part that still remains from my rape is uncontrolled arousal. When I feel completely exhausted or sick, I am troubled by the desire to watch porn or replicate my rape in some way. I struggle with the difference between the healthy sexuality I want to bring to my husband and the unhealthy sexuality coming from damage from my rape and childhood confusion.

It wasn't until I shared my story with my counselor that I realized I had been raped and it wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault, even though I was the one who got drunk and high as an adult. I couldn't even say the words "I was raped" until I spoke my story out loud to my SAVAnon group.

Through counseling and being a part of a SAVAnon group, I've learned how all the shame from my childhood led to a heart starved for love, touch, and being known. All my heart needed and craved was to be told I had value. Today I understand that God made me with a fiery spirit, unafraid to rock any boat. I wish I could hug the little girl I used to be and tell her that God would use her bravery to protect vulnerable women and children because she's not afraid to take a few thumps along the way.

It took many years to understand that I am not someone to serve selfish sexual desires, a lie that I had believed. Before therapy, I viewed sex as an obligation; I was supposed to be a willing actor in any sexual fantasy, another lie. My husband has demonstrated his love for me by never demanding degrading sexual acts or even urging me into sex when I'm not in the mood. It was his love of my heart that helped me realize I was more than a puppet for a man to use for his pleasure. I discovered that I had glory, this beautiful worth that was bestowed on me by my creator, and I had something to offer that was in me and not dependent on sexual performance. As I processed my story, I began to release the filth and shame I felt concerning sex and replace it with a focus on healthy fun and intimacy.

I still feel the pain of my sexual history, but it's something that helps me remember how far I have come and how beautiful I am as a person. There

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is no black stain on me that makes me less worthy of the love I think my own daughter deserves. I still struggle with God over control of my life, but I know he loves me just as I am and it is glorious to live liberated from the old lies.

DISCUSS BRILYNN'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Brilynn's story?
2. What were some of the lies that Brilynn embraced?
3. How did the lies she believed affect her 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 her story, Brilynn talked about the lies she believed. Some of the common lies associated with sexual abuse include falsehoods and fabrications like:

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

Victims No More

- “It’s my fault that I was abused.”
- “I could have stopped it if only I had said something.”
- “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.”
- “It won’t do any good to look at the past.”

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 very lovable and worthy of genuine love.

In previous groups, some women 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 don’t need to 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 more than that. Overcoming the lies spawned through sexual abuse *is* largely a matter of your will, but the problem is that your emotions may betray you. The emotions you’re feeling may seem to confirm some of those lies.

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Emotions are fickle. You can be sad one moment and happy the next. But by recognizing your emotions you can begin to confront and re-train them. You do this through speaking truth to yourself and by hearing the truth from others and accepting it.

While this may seem awkward, 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 so you can begin to live them.

Some of these truths might include:

- “It was not my fault that I was sexually abused.”
- “What my abuser did to me was awful and wrong.”
- “There are no reasons that would justify what was done to me.”
- “No one’s evil actions toward me make me dirty or soiled.”
- “I am beautiful and deeply loved by others.”
- “Though I was hurt, I am healing and getting stronger.”
- “I am valued and esteemed by others.”
- “The innocence 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 down-play 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.

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, loving, 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

Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

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?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Session Five—Sophie’s story and Healing Action 4: Consider the Possibility of Repressed Memories. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week. The Appendix contains an account of dissociation as a result of satanic ritual abuse. Reading the story and the accompanying discussion is completely optional.

My Journal



Session Five

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

GROUP MEMBER STORY

We want to take time to allow each of you to share your story in a safe, caring environment. Each week, a member of our group will

share her story. As you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

SOPHIE'S STORY

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

My story starts with religion. I had accepted Christ at a very young age but for years I was afraid my commitment didn't "take." I would regularly ask Christ to come into my life in case I had sinned and caused Him to leave. I did my best to follow Jesus, and I know now it was the shame of my abuse that kept me fearful that Christ would leave me.

The youngest of three, I grew up in a home where we went to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night. However, my family didn't live out the values being taught, hiding behind the appearance of being faithful attenders at church. My parents met at an Independent Fundamental Baptist group home for troubled teens. My mother supervised one of the girls' homes and my father was a pastor/pilot/fundraiser for the organization. There was rampant physical and sexual abuse at this home. My parents took part in the abuse, viewing the girls as damaged goods, calling them "drug addicts and prostitutes." They justified the abuse and mistreatment while claiming to be saving their souls. This mentality permeated our family and our lives.

To say the home I grew up in was unstable and chaotic would be an understatement. My earliest memory of sexual abuse was by my brother when I was four years old. Like many who experience trauma, I put this out of my mind and moved on. When I was ten years old, I remember being assaulted by my brother again. I carried these two memories with

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me, almost as a marker that something in my family was off. The memories were fuzzy and honestly, I didn't want to dwell on them much. All I remembered was knowing I could never tell my family about what had happened. I would never be able to tell them how I was feeling about it, because somehow, I was certain my family would never protect me. To survive, my mind buried these memories behind a wall and I moved forward like it never happened.

My family dysfunction was so intense and I longed so much for some form of closure and acknowledgement, that when I was in college, I called my brother and apologized to him... for the things he did to me! After that very awkward phone call, I considered myself healed and I moved forward in life.

When I was 23 my father went missing. He was a pilot and was flying in Anchorage, Alaska with two other pilots, and all three disappeared over the water. I asked God to save my dad, but the answer was no. My father went missing at the end of July and by October he was officially presumed dead. Despite growing up in an abusive family, this was the first time in my life I felt like God had let me down.

Needless to say, God's "no" did not go over well. My father's disappearance left me feeling frustrated, angry, and abandoned. I started to feel that since the things that were important to me were not so important to God. then the things that were important to God were no longer so important to me. I made a (one-sided) deal with God: we could still be friends; I would still love him, but I wanted some space.

During that time, I did whatever I wanted. I found a man and we started playing house. We moved across the country and in together. I call it playing house because I believe he never really wanted to be with me, and part of me always knew this was a bad idea. He was narcissistic, emotionally and verbally abusive, and would regularly gaslight me. After almost three years and a half-hearted proposal from him, I decided I had

had enough of my fiancé's abuse and I left. I moved back in with my mom, who was thrilled, declaring that she wanted us to grow old together.

A few days after I moved home, I reconnected with the man who is now my husband. We started dating in December, by April we were engaged, and by August we were married—much to my mom's displeasure. He was a youth pastor and my mom repeatedly told me she thought he could do better than marrying me; he needed to marry a virgin. She regularly called me the "women at the well," which was her way of calling me a whore. I am so thankful I didn't listen to her.

I never thought to mention anything about my past abuse to my husband because I believed I was "fine." I had moved on from the past and buried the abuse so deep I genuinely considered myself healed.

It wasn't until we had our second child four years after we married that my memories refused to stay hidden. I was feeding our three-week-old son in the middle of the night and I don't even know how to describe what happened. I felt so lost and alone, devastated by emotions that went far past normal postpartum hormones. I had no idea how to raise a son. No idea how to keep his older sister safe. No idea how to process what had happened to me. I was overwhelmed with memories of my own abuse and terrified it could happen to my children.

The next day I sat down with my husband and told him a very abbreviated version of what had happened to me. Together we worked out some boundaries with my family that would keep my children and me safe. This was the first time in my life boundaries had been drawn and they enfolded and protected me! I felt seen and cared for. Soon after this, I joined a group of women I trusted and we started a Bible study to begin the healing process together.

After the Bible study was finished, I felt I had received a level of healing and was ready to move forward. However, over the next few years, I experienced things I could not understand. Feeling overwhelmed and

hypervigilant, I was often unable to process emotions. I would regularly have phantom pains in my abdomen. I was frozen by the inability to say no and the fear of letting anyone down. I was tired all the time, almost as if I was running marathons every day. I had all the symptoms of someone with deep, deep trauma but no memory of that trauma.

After we moved to Spokane, I started working for a pregnancy resource center. It was my responsibility to interview each new volunteer, and one of our standard questions was about their personal history with sexual abuse or past abortions. If they had these experiences, I would recommend they join a SAVAnon or AbAnon class. Not too long after I started working there, I began to feel like a hypocrite. I knew I had my own story of sexual abuse, but had never attended classes because I didn't think I needed further healing.

I finally participated in a SAVAnon group and found myself better able to process my abuse, but I suspected I might have some repressed memories. There were very large chunks of my childhood I could not remember. By repressing the memories of the abuse, I also repressed every other memory from that time.

After attending SAVAnon, I was ready to seek help from a counselor. During one session, as I was sharing the memory of abuse by my brother at 10-years-old, my body responded and for the first time I was able to verbalize that I was raped by my brother. That started me on a journey of EMDR. (Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing) EMDR helps you recall memories, build a category for them, and ease the pain associated with them. Truth be told, I was annoyed by my body and felt betrayed. How did I have all these experiences that I didn't remember?

I have done some research since then to figure out why I couldn't remember them. It came down to fight, flight, freeze or fawn. I couldn't fight and I couldn't flee. The only thing I could do was freeze and take it. All that I was enduring was so horrific that my mind created a secluded place for

this abuse to live and I actively refused to look at it. Our nervous systems compensate for these threats almost instantaneously. So, while we may not understand how our brains compartmentalize these terrible experiences, or agree with it afterward, our bodies are desperately trying to take care of us.

This is where new layers opened up in my story. As I worked with the counselor, I would call my older sister and ask for her help with our historical family time-line. She could make sense of some of my missing pieces or fuzzy dates. One day, my questions sent her into a flashback and she remembered being assaulted as well.

As my sister and I worked through our memories of abuse separately, God showed us, within days of each other, that it was primarily our father who assaulted us. My dad took sexual abuse to a whole new level. My earliest memories of being raped by him start at age 3. The last time it happened was the day he went missing, when I was 23. I now remember being forced to watch him strangle women he was raping. A murderer, he would regularly make my sister and me wear the clothes and jewelry from his other victims. While I was wearing these, he would strangle me to the point of passing out. I still have scar tissue on my neck from his re-enactment of what he did to his other victims. Part of what kept me from speaking out was my fear that my father would kill me, too.

I was assaulted regularly by my father, whether he was feeling happy, angry, or just aroused. The assaults were used for his own pleasure, as punishments for misbehavior, or if I failed to comply with his abuse. During my EMDR counseling sessions, I remembered more assaults by my brother. When my sister and I put our time-line to paper, I was able to confirm that when I was eight years old, I was also raped by my uncle. He picked me up, took me to his house and assaulted me while wearing his sheriff's uniform. He then drove me back to my grandparents' house where we were staying while we visited Washington. This was another

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reason I did not go to the authorities. It seemed every authority figure in my life was dangerous.

Eventually, Mom moved in with my sister and seemed to be very troubled by us digging around in the past. She kept telling us to stop and fretted over being sent to jail if we continued pursuing the truth. She kept saying, "Your dad is going to kill me when they find him!" This confused my sister and me immensely since he was presumed dead. But our memories of the abuse and her fear shed new light on his disappearance. A detective in Alaska, where he disappeared, has now opened a missing persons investigation.

As my mother was following my sister around their house one day, she kept asking her, "What else are you going to remember that you are going to hate me for?" Her constant questioning triggered a memory of my mother holding us down while my father raped us. During the assault, my mom would repeat the phrase, "You won't remember this when you are older." With this new information, we knew the police had to get involved. My mother refused to talk to the police and has stopped all communication with us. I have not spoken with her since.

As I have continued the process of healing, I recalled the memories of being pregnant at age 14 and again at 17. When I was 14 and pregnant, my mom concocted the same home remedy she would give to the women at the group home where she met my dad. She forced me to drink it. When I was 17, I was just finishing a season as a diver on the school swim team. I had severe abdominal cramps and started missing my periods, which was very odd for me, because my period was like clock-work. I had numerous pregnancy symptoms, but the doctors were confused because, according to my mom (who went to every appointment with me and answered every question for me), I was not sexually active. Believing her, they ran every test except a pregnancy test.

Three months later my mother took me to an abortion clinic “to have the problem dealt with.” I was never given a choice; my parents made the choice. I remember going into the clinic with my mom, sitting in a chair in the lobby while she talked with the receptionist. I walked to the back room. The table was blue pleather. I remember the sound of the suction; it was so loud. When it was done, we got in the car and drove the three hours back to our home.

Later that month, I ended up having to go to the doctor and they were confused by the obvious trauma to my genital area with no reason given to explain it. Working through the trauma of having an abortion was so hard and continues to be hard. Knowing this child was my father’s and I would have been a sister-mom created such repulsion. Then I felt guilty for feeling repulsed. This was not the baby’s fault, nor was it mine. I remember feeling that if this child could have been born, surely someone would have noticed the close genetic markers and uncovered the truth of my abuse. Maybe, somehow, this baby would have been my ticket out of the fire. We might have escaped together. This was never allowed to be an option, as it would have exposed the true nature of my family.

My abortion was used to hide my severe abuse. Had any of the staff or doctors acted on the fact they were mandatory reporters; had they cared to ask any questions, they would have seen the truth and might have stepped in. Had they been required to keep records, I would have been able to go back and verify the dates of my pregnancy. Through prayer and healing, I believe I was pregnant with a little girl.

My healing journey is still very much in process. I have filed police reports, but waiting for the police to move forward is painful and frustrating. Despite what we see on television, police investigation is a slow process. Quick resolutions and easy wrap-ups are not common. I am working on trusting in God’s timing and that justice will happen.

Equally slow has been the process of replacing the lies with the truth. As each new trauma surfaced, it made me question my self-worth. For so many years my self-worth and who I was as a person was directly tied to my ability to play my part in our dysfunctional family unit. Playing my part was also tied to my own physical safety. This has taken some time to sort through, but with God's help I am beginning to see myself as His loved daughter, valued and wanted, not for what I can bring to Him but because of His great love for me.

DISCUSS SOPHIE'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Sophie's story?
2. In what ways did Sophie's abuse affect her?
3. What are you taking away from Sophie's story to help you process your trauma?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE HEALING ACTION 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF REPPRESSED 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.¹²

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.”¹³ 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 are going crazy, which they are not.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF REPRESSED MEMORIES

In Sophie’s story, you read about how she discovered her repressed memories. In the beginning, she couldn’t remember the extent of her abuse, but she recognized the symptoms of sexual abuse in her life. She displayed numerous indicators of the abuse, but it was a counselor that helped draw out of her the actual events that had taken place.

12 Renee Fredrickson, PhD, *Repressed Memories—A Journey to Recovery from Sexual Abuse* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 23

13 Dr. Jim Hopper, “Recovered Memories of Sexual Abuse,” nd, <https://www.jimhopper.com/child-abuse/recovered-memories/>.

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You may either know or suspect you were sexually abused, but you may not currently know the extent of your abuse. These are some warning signs that you *may have* repressed memories:¹⁴

- 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
- Experiencing the above issues despite a general sense of well-being or happiness

An odd phobia could include a fear of bathrooms, flashbacks when you hear a shower, or being touched or caressed in a certain way. Suppressed memories might be triggered by events, objects or odors unknowingly associated with sexual abuse, or you could have an unusually strong response to someone else's story of abuse.

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:

14 Renee Fredrickson, PhD, pp. 33-46.

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.¹⁵

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

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.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF REPRESSED MEMORIES

Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

1. Many 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?

15 Renee Fredrickson, PhD, pp. 30.

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2. Why might it be important to get the help needed to recall what happened to you?
3. What challenges or obstacles need to be overcome in order to pursue healing from repressed memories?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Session Six–Lisa’s story and Healing Action 5: Admit to Poor Choices and Abandon Unhealthy Coping Methods. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week. Continue journaling.

My Journal



Session Six

*The trauma response is a sign of strength; it is not a sign of weakness.
It is a sign that your neurobiology is adapting to threat; it is not a sign
that you are broken. – Mary Catherine McDonald*

GROUP MEMBER STORY

We want to take time to allow each of you to share your story in a safe, caring environment. Each week, a member of our group will share her story. As you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

LISA'S STORY

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

From my earliest memories, I recall being a problem. I never felt like I fit in or was welcome. I would describe the first five years of my life as desperate and the subsequent years as troubled.

When I entered elementary school, I constantly had bloody noses, was prone to crying, and was very sad. I remember hearing someone say, "There goes Louis Dolbee's daughter—she's bad!" I could not figure out why, but somehow knew it was true.

I grew up in Illinois. Mom and Dad had a lot of relatives nearby, so all of us cousins grew up together and we frequently had sleepovers. When I was in second grade, one of my male cousins, who was three or four years older than I, crept in to where I was sleeping. He held a knife to my throat and made me touch him and he fondled me. Over time, he did this repeatedly.

He threatened to cut me if I woke his sisters or told anybody. I thought there was something wrong with me, so I felt I couldn't tell anyone anyway.

The sexual abuse from my cousin continued. I learned to use my sexuality to control and manipulate guys while being filled with guilt and low self-worth.

When I was in fourth grade, Dad started long-haul trucking. Being away from home a lot, he was unfaithful to Mom. He also drank heavily and would fly off the handle at the slightest provocation. I remember him throwing his food and silverware at Mom at the dinner table.

Dad always saw women as sex objects: were they shapely enough, sexy enough, feisty enough? And he had a way with people, especially women; he was hard to resist, charming and engaging.

As I grew up, I discovered why I was so unwanted. Apparently when my brother was three, my parents split up over Dad's drinking. Mom had a weak moment of reconciliation with him, had become pregnant with me and resented it. Dad also said some hellish things to me. When I was in dance classes or sang in a choir, he'd say things like, "You're the only one off-step." Or, "You're the only one singing off-key." Or, "You'd be amazing if you weren't dumber than a box of rocks!" All of these comments confirmed for me that yes, I was less than valuable and a mistake.

When I was in fifth grade, Mom and Dad had talked about getting braces for my brother and me. Instead, they used the money to get a divorce.

By the sixth grade I was into drugs and alcohol and used my body as a sex tool. When I was 12, my mom allowed my brother's boss to "date" me. He was 28. I thought we were in love and there was finally a man in my life that would care for me. We went out a few times and then he raped me in the front seat of his car. Even though I had used my sexuality freely before this, I had never had intercourse.

My mom allowed this "relationship" to continue. I believe my poor mother just had no idea what to do. I was deathly afraid of losing his "love" and continued to have sex with him. I had no concept of "pedophile" in my world or vocabulary and thought this was what I had to do to be loved. When he broke it off, and I do not even remember how that happened, I was devastated.

I didn't feel loved or wanted anywhere or by anybody. I used to think sex was what I wanted, but I hated it. My brother blamed me for all my woes, saying it was what I wanted. Later, I realized that I just wanted to be loved and my brother was as helpless as I was.

After my parents divorced, Mom worked full-time and our house became party central. All our friends hung out there and we smoked and drank. I went through one boyfriend after another. When Mom was at work, even my dad would come party with us.

Soon, Mom met another man. He too was a drunk, but he was a “happy” drunk and didn’t get angry or violent. When they married, the partying stopped at our house. I moved out at 16, because I didn’t want to be under the authority of my stepdad.

I was living with friends while I was still in high school. But when I was 17, I got expelled for possession of drugs. The police gave me the option of being placed in the custody of my dad or going to jail. I longed for him to love me in a healthy way. I idolized my dad and didn’t want to let him down, so I chose to go to jail. I only spent a couple hours there before friends bailed me out.

My brother had moved to Indiana, so I convinced my mom, stepdad and dad that I should move there to finish high school. This was a huge mistake. My brother lived in an exclusive, wealthy suburb and everyone there saw me as white trash. I was still partying and I found it hard to function in a school setting where I was not welcome. So, I dropped out of high school and got a full-time job.

I was still living with my brother, but his girlfriend didn’t like me and wanted me to move out. So, I got into a relationship with a man named Bill and moved in with him. We got pregnant and I wanted to abort. I knew that if I had the baby, I’d have to go on welfare and didn’t want to do that. Also, I reasoned that having the baby would have tied me to Bill for the rest of my life and I didn’t want that, either. I see all of this as sin upon sin now.

Bill wanted me to keep the baby, so he asked his “Christian” father to talk to me and I agreed. He brought a recording with him and asked me to listen to it. A child’s voice kept repeating, “Mommy, don’t kill me. Please don’t kill me.”

I had heard enough and stopped the audio. I asked him if he was prepared to buy diapers and formula for my baby and if his church would stand behind me. But he said that was my responsibility. His callous

attitude drove me to the abortion clinic, or at least that was my justification. Abstinence was never a thought.

After the abortion, I went into a severe depression and Bill became very weird sexually, so I left him. I got a new job and met Danny. I was so desperate and had such low self-esteem that I let him teach me to shoot up methamphetamines. Then, perhaps a year later, I saw one of my girlfriends lying in a bathtub. She had dwindled to about 80 pounds and was beating on herself trying to get a vein up.

With that pathetic sight, I saw where I was headed and how I would die. I longed for the life of a white picket fence, a two-car garage, and a loving family, so I quit everything cold-turkey. I told Danny I was going to move back to Illinois to live with my dad and his new wife. Dad was sober then, but smoked pot. Danny came with me and we lived with them for a while.

When we moved in, Dad insisted that I get my GED. I still idolized him, so I did as he asked and I'm glad I did.

A short time later, Danny got a letter informing him that he was in trouble with the law over child support in Indiana. We got married, fixed up a Ford van and headed to Montana. I continued running on this treadmill of desperation.

We lived in Helena, Montana for a year. I had been stealing from my employer in Helena, but rather than prosecute, they asked me to leave. A pot-dealing friend moved to Spokane, Washington, so we followed him there. In Spokane we became managers of a low-income housing project that was rife with drugs and the lifestyle that accompanies it.

While managing this apartment complex, I met a woman who had been a victim of incest. She told me that sexual abuse was never the child's fault. I had never heard this before and had always assumed it was my fault. It took me a long time and a lot of therapy to believe I wasn't at fault. Adults are supposed to protect children. Instead, they took something

from me they shouldn't have that left me confused and broken about my worth and sexuality.

After four years with Danny and no children, I told him I wanted out of the drug world forever. He agreed to go to treatment through the VA and they sent him to Wyoming. The VA required that I go to counseling for codependency while he was in treatment. There I learned that the rape and sexual abuse was not my fault, but that the drug use was my responsibility. I really threw myself into the training and took it to heart.

My boss in the property management world became my mentor and we started programs to assist people in the low-income apartments I managed who had similar life struggles to mine, although not many knew my story. I had a way of glamorizing my life. We also offered financial aid classes for those who wanted to go to college. And one day one of the ladies asked, "Why don't you go to college?" So, I did!

Danny got out of treatment in Wyoming and on the way home in the car he said that his counselor had told him to try drugs one more time to make sure he no longer liked them. I told him he was a fool to think I'd fall for that lie.

I filed for divorce and Danny disappeared. I was in college and doing better. I was working and going to therapy, but I still hadn't healed in my self-esteem or in relationships with men and I got pregnant again. I loved college, even though I had hated school in my younger years. In college I was learning valuable skills and was challenged. I didn't want to throw all this away or move back to my family in Illinois. I felt trapped by the pregnancy, so I aborted again, late-term this time, and swore off men—at least for a while.

However, sometime later I met Charlie on a blind date. He was unlike any other man I'd ever met. He was kind, sweet, and polite. He did not treat me with half-heartedness and did not only want sex from me. We fell in love immediately. We both decided to go to counseling, so we could grow and become better people.

Charlie and I got married three years later and I got pregnant right away. This pregnancy ended in miscarriage that I was sure was my fault because of the abortions. I vowed then to become the healthiest person, the best specimen for pregnancy and motherhood, if I could only conceive again and carry a baby to term. I hoped to be given another chance. One year later, our son was born in March and I graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in June.

It is important for me to say that despite all the things that were wrong in my family, I wanted to believe my parents were decent people. After I ran away to Montana with Danny, my mother and I were able to restore our relationship in a deeper way. This was a good relationship for the remainder of her short life. She died ten years after we reconciled. She and Charlie were best buds and we enjoyed the time we had with her.

DISCUSS LISA'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Lisa's story?
2. What were some of the poor life choices that Lisa made because of her abuse?
3. What are some of the poor life choices you have made that could be linked to being sexually abused?

4. Lisa's beliefs about herself changed. What influenced those changes? How does this inspire you?

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 woman starts believing the lies that she is worthless, dirty, and soiled, she may start living her life accordingly. Surrendering to these lies can lead to a life of desperation, resulting in self-destructive behaviors such as:

- Promiscuity
- Addictions
- Self Medicating
- Reckless Behavior
- Self-harm
- Prostitution
- Failed relationships
- Eating disorders
- Poor relational skills

We might easily recognize the behaviors listed above as unhealthy and self-destructive. There are, however, behaviors that are not as easy to identify as harmful, including:

- Perfectionism
- Inability to say no
- Excessive caretaking
- Codependency
- Extreme isolation
- Controlling behavior
- Hyper-Vigilance

When you add one or more of these self-destructive behaviors to the trauma you're already experiencing from your sexual abuse, the result can be devastating. Although these behaviors may be understandable under the circumstances, they are evidence that you are either punishing or protecting yourself in ways that only serve to prolong and worsen your trauma.

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.

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, or close friends to break free from the bondage. Your journey may take considerable time and be difficult as you experience setbacks and challenges associated with leaving an addiction.

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

1. Your first step is admitting that you are engaging in an unhealthy coping method. Acknowledging this to others, like this group, can help you to decide to abandon this behavior.
2. Next, seek the necessary help, perhaps from a counselor or life coach, to remove this behavior from your life, following 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 good will 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 those behaviors. Use your journal to identify and acknowledge any unhealthy coping methods.

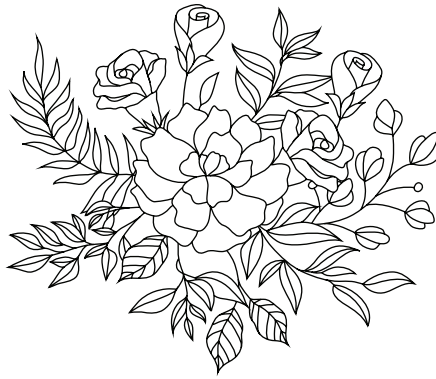
DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 5: ADMIT TO POOR CHOICES AND ABANDON UNHEALTHY COPING METHODS

Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

1. On pages 72-73, please check the box next to each coping behavior you have experienced. What led to your participation in these behaviors??
2. What is the first step to freeing yourself from self-destructive behaviors?
3. Maybe you never allowed yourself to dream about your future. Knowing your true value and worth, can you think of anything you might like to pursue?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Session Seven—Carol’s story and Healing Action 6: Healing Requires Forgiveness. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week. Keep journaling.



Session Seven

Sooner or later you act out what you really believe.

– Unknown

GROUP MEMBER STORY

We want to take time to allow each of you to share your story in a safe, caring environment. Each week, a member of our group will share her story. As you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

CAROL'S STORY

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

When I was four years old, my father began molesting me in various ways. At that young age, I didn't understand that what Daddy was asking me to do wasn't right. When I was perhaps eight, nine and ten, he manipulated me with the words, "You don't want me to have an affair with another woman and leave home do you?" Out of fear, I yielded to his demands. In similar ways, he often threatened me, manipulated me and controlled me.

About that time, my father pressured Mom to get a job. She started working evenings, which got her out of the house, giving him more opportunity to engage in his secret acts. At the time, I thought my mom probably suspected what he was up to, but she was passive and fearful, so she said nothing. But there was a lot of unspoken tension in our home. My older brother also sensed that something wasn't right.

Dad abused me frequently until I was 13. The older I got, the more I realized that what he was doing was wrong. We lived in a small town and 13 was about the age when girls started dating. I wanted to date and decided I had had enough, so I convinced him to stop.

I started dating at 13 and had a steady boyfriend who was 16. Because of my upbringing, I didn't know how to resist the advances of a young man. For my age, I knew too much and had experienced too much. I felt separated from my peers. I carried a lot of shame.

Meanwhile, Dad still would make his advances and try to catch me naked in the shower. There was no lock on the bathroom door. One evening

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I was in the shower getting ready for a date when my dad walked in on me and I had had enough.

That night my boyfriend could tell something was wrong, so I spilled my guts and told him everything. But instead of offering me sympathy, he said it was all my fault. That was the end of that relationship.

I was really struggling, trying to hold all my hurt inside, feeling like I might implode. I didn't want to go to college, but I knew I had to get far away from home, so I joined the Air Force.

Now, away from home and our small town, I felt like a volcano inside wanting to erupt. My pain, shame and guilt spewed from every pore of my being. For about two-and-a-half years, I succumbed to a deep depression. I didn't know what to do or how to process my pain.

Despairing for a solution, I began smoking pot and taking drugs, just trying to handle my feelings. I entered and exited a series of relationships with guys and used sex to manipulate and control them just as I had been taught. These sexual escapades were vengeful and my behavior self-destructive. I hurt a lot of men.

I felt trapped, desperately seeking a way out, but not finding it. I read psychology and self-help books but found no healing in them. I turned to Eastern religions, but they didn't heal my heart either. I ran into dead-end after dead-end.

After Tech School, I requested assignment in Germany because my brother was stationed there, but I got orders to Japan. There I met a guy named Dave. He was different from the other guys. We were just good friends. He was a Christian and that puzzled me about him. He was always kind, full of joy, and unashamed of his faith. He talked to me often about Jesus Christ, but I was still looking elsewhere for healing.

I met with counselors, talked to friends, and finally went to a chaplain. When I told him about my past, he became violently angry. He told me to

write my parents a scathing letter and report my dad to the police. That night I got high on drugs and wrote a letter to my parents. It really hurt my mom, but she never let my dad see it. I didn't feel right about reporting him to the police, so I didn't.

Sometime after this, I met some Japanese business owners. They ran a bar that was a front for prostitution. They told me there was a lot of money in prostitution and that as an American I would be a novelty among the Japanese men.

I was genuinely considering their offer. But as I walked back to the base that evening, I heard a voice telling me, "You are at a crossroads. If you take the path of prostitution, you will never return. But there is another way."

My despair was so deep I began contemplating killing myself. In this state of mind, I went to work that night. Dave was working the same shift. I told him, "I'm at the end of my rope and don't know what to do." Dave said, "Your problems are too big for you to carry. You need Jesus to carry them for you."

What he said was perplexing. I didn't understand it, but it struck a note with me. So, when I got home after work I thought, "Heck, I've tried everything else, why not?" I got down on my knees and prayed, "God, if you're real, and if Jesus would actually carry my burdens for me, then come into my life." My feeble prayer was sincere, and I scrounged through my stuff and pulled out a New Testament.

Jesus came alive to me in its pages. Shortly after giving my life to Jesus, I met Chris, who was also a Christian. I'm convinced that God sent Chris to give me a new life, a fresh start. He was so kind and accepting. I now knew that I was on a path of healing.

Chris and I became engaged and got married very quickly, and I got pregnant right away. Up until then, the military had been a pressure-cooker

for me. I experienced a lot of sexual harassment. My pregnancy gave me the option for a discharge from the Air Force, so I took it.

Soon after we were married, I was standing in the kitchen preparing a meal. I was just minding my own business when I distinctly heard God say to me, "You need to forgive your dad." I immediately feared that my dad would try to manipulate me again, but I told God, "I don't know how to forgive him. You'll have to show me how." And God began to change my heart.

I started to understand that as long as I saw myself as a victim, I would be chained to that. I would be its slave. When you become victimized, a part of you dies and you get stuck. I felt as though I was wrapped up in many layers of guilt and shame. But God began peeling off these old layers, little by little, and setting me free.

Chris and I tentatively began a relationship with my parents, and I found out that my dad had been badly abused as a child. He had been beaten and passed around from home to home, never finishing high school. He, too, was a victim needing help. I now realized that he was a product of what he grew up with. Understanding his background clarified, but did not justify, his behavior toward me. I still needed to forgive him for what he did to me and how it affected my life. I came to a point where I forgave my dad in my heart and was set free from the shame, pain, anger and hatred.

I had a good talk with my mom and forgave her, too. She had known all those years about the sexual abuse but had been afraid to do anything because it would have put her out on her own, and she didn't know how she could have supported us two kids.

At 58, my mom got cancer. During her illness, she gave her life to Christ and was cancer-free for the next eight years. But all the while, my dad kept undermining her faith and finally talked her out of following Jesus. I believe he did this out of the great sense of guilt he carried for what he

had done. He didn't consider himself worthy of Christ's forgiveness, so why should anyone else enjoy it?

After eight years her cancer came back. On her deathbed she saw "houses in heaven." She slipped into a coma for many days. One day I was sitting with her, not knowing whether she could hear me. I encouraged her to put her trust in Christ for her eternal destiny. Suddenly, she sat bolt upright in bed, looked at me and said, "Honey, I do believe!" And then she lay back down in a coma. She passed a few days later.

With Mom gone, one of my greatest fears reemerged. My brother lived far away, so it was just Dad and me. I had forgiven my father, but I didn't want that victim mentality returning. Within the next two years, Dad went through two quick marriages and divorces. He was still living a very troubled existence.

When Dad's health began failing, Chris and I invited him to move in with us so I could care for him. God filled me with so much grace and forgiveness for my dad that I was able to bathe him every few days and do so without fear.

As his health worsened, I'd ask him, "Dad, don't you have any spiritual questions as you draw near death?" He always responded, "No!"

Then, towards the end of his life, he asked me one day if I heard singing. His mind was still very sharp, so I knew this wasn't dementia. He explained further, "It sounds like a choir singing to me." Not knowing what else to say, I said, "Dad, I think it's angels."

A day or two later, I came in and greeted my dad in the morning. He said, "Honey, thank you for staying with me last night. You sat on the bed and held my hand." I told him that wasn't me and that it must have been the Lord. Dad was stunned.

Then he said, "I need to say 'goodbye' to you. I'm leaving soon." With that, I told my dad once again that God loved him so much that he sent his

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Son Jesus to die for his sins. All he had to do is receive His gift of forgiveness and he could spend eternity in heaven with Mom and me.

Dad's eyes welled up with tears. I asked him, "Dad, would you like that?" He said, "Yes!" And he prayed and asked Jesus into his heart.

The years of brokenness and sin that I experienced brought my mom and dad to Christ. Jesus Christ redeemed all those lost years of misery and He healed me.

DISCUSS CAROL'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Carol's story?
2. In what ways did Carol's abuse affect her?
3. What are you taking away from Carol's story to help you process your trauma?

HOW WE HEAL FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

HEALING ACTION 6: HEALING REQUIRES FORGIVENESS

As you've read the stories of sexual abuse in this curriculum, you may have noticed that many of these survivors expressed the vital role that forgiveness played in their healing.

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 Carol explained, when we see ourselves as victims, we’re powerless and chained by that mentality. But when we extend forgiveness, we break free from a victim mentality.

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 kindness and mercy.

Conversely, when we withhold forgiveness and hold a grudge against someone, we are admitting that they hold power over us. We grant them “free rent” in our mind and thoughts. Our bitterness and anger toward our offender keep us victims of their abuse.

As Jenny put it in her story, “Holding a grudge is like taking poison and hoping the other person will die.” 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.

Forgiveness is **NOT**:

- making allowances
- forgetting
- an open door for more wrongdoing
- reconciliation

Forgiveness **IS**:

- a choice
- a process
- dismissing the blame
- feeling the hurt and then releasing the hurt

As you read Carol's story this week and how she forgave her dad and became his caregiver, perhaps you thought, "I could never do that!" Carol's story is truly unique. No one expects a family member to do what she or Lisa did in becoming their offender's caregiver.

In Jenny's story from week two, she explains the path she chose to forgive her abuser:

Having experienced Christ's forgiveness for me, I felt compelled to forgive Ted. When I forgave Ted, it did NOT mean that what he did was now somehow okay. What he did was awful. My forgiving him also doesn't mean that I want a relationship with him. For obvious reasons, I've chosen not to establish contact or a relationship with him. I trust God, but I don't trust Ted. I know that this plays out differently for other women who have been abused, but that's how I've chosen to move forward.

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

would probably take offense and only trouble you. This even applies to someone with whom you still have regular contact.

2. This act of forgiving your abuser is 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. Prepare a short statement that you will actually speak aloud. This statement may say something like:
“ (person’s name) , I forgive you for what you did to me and I release my grudge against you.”
Go somewhere private to do this. Saying it aloud is important because it helps validate the act and demands that you speak it in a way that you mean it.

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. And any interaction you do have with them should demonstrate the fact that you have forgiven them.

5. From time to time, as memories of your abuse surface, you may find yourself struggling with hostility toward your abuser. This is natural. Remind yourself that you’ve forgiven them and repeat your statement of forgiveness as many times as you need to, so

you no longer have to let those 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. Some people experience an immediate and complete sense of release and freedom in forgiveness. With others, it occurs over time. Don't be discouraged; keep rehearsing the truth of what you know and who you are. With time, those caustic feelings toward your abuser should lessen.

Forgiveness is incredibly restorative. Extending and receiving forgiveness offers you a cleansed, renewed emotional outlook. Extending and receiving forgiveness is vital to your healing process.

RECEIVING FORGIVENESS

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, women who have been sexually abused can feel a tremendous sense of shame and guilt associated with their abuse. Some have expressed feeling dirty and soiled, 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. Although we were not responsible for our

abuse, we are responsible for our responses to it. And for this reason, we may need to receive forgiveness ourselves.

This week you read Carol's story. As she considered a life of prostitution, she found herself at a crossroads. Her friend, Dave, told her that she needed Jesus to carry her burdens for her, so she took a chance and asked Jesus to come into her life.

Her story is similar to that of a woman in the Bible who also encountered Jesus. One day, a Pharisee (a religious leader) invited Jesus to dinner. The customs of that day and place were very different from what we're used to. Jesus and the other guests reclined on the floor around a low table for the meal.

When a certain immoral woman from that city heard Jesus was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!" Then Jesus answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you."

"Go ahead, Teacher," Simon replied.

Then Jesus told him this story: "A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?"

Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt."

"That's right," Jesus said. Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume.

*"I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace."
(Luke 7:36-50 NLT)¹⁶*

We don't know the background story of this woman other than that she had lived an immoral life. Perhaps she had been sexually abused as well. But we do know that she had been weighed down with the shame and guilt of her past. We also see how quick others were to judge and condemn her.

But she came to Jesus believing that He could forgive her and cleanse her from her past. She came to Him humbly and expressed her great love for Him in these tender acts of affection and gratitude. Jesus, knowing her past, was not ashamed to be associated with her, but accepted her as she was. He allowed her to serve Him in this loving way and because of her trust in Him, He forgave her all her sins—without reservation-- and He gave her a new life.

¹⁶ *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. 2015. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publications

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 cleanse us from all guilt and shame and give us a new life. His forgiveness is nothing we can earn. Jesus paid for our sins by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. By simply trusting Him, He reconciles us with God.

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. As one woman put it, "He gave me my innocence back." He brings the truth of who we are, the motivation to want to heal, and the ability to do the work required.

We acknowledge that many who have endured sexual abuse are angry with God. This feeling is perfectly normal. "Where was He? Why did He allow such torment and misery?" There are no easy answers to these questions, but be assured that when you cried, He cried. You may feel that He let you down, that He didn't meet your expectations. God is not offended by your strong emotions; you can freely express your anger, disappointment and dismay to Him, and He will respond with understanding, love and comfort.

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.

FORGIVING YOURSELF

Sometimes you might struggle to forgive yourself, despite the fact that the abuse is not your fault. Perhaps you carry guilt over poor coping choices or anger directed at people uninvolved in your abuse. Maybe you are tormented by choices you made that may have led to

your abuse: getting drunk, failing to say no. Whatever your reason, if you struggle with forgiving yourself, there are ways to move forward.

We encourage you to look at yourself as you would look at another woman who might be in your situation. Would you accept her as she is and extend mercy and forgiveness to that woman? If so, do the same toward yourself.

It can be very helpful to repeat step #3 on page 86, putting your name in the statement and releasing the grudge against yourself.

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

Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

1. Why is extending forgiveness so crucial to our healing?
2. What stood out for you, or what challenges do you find in this healing action?
3. Forgiveness is often a process. Where are you in that process?

PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Please read Session Eight–Heather’s story and Healing Action 7: Believe You Can Experience Healing. Respond to the corresponding questions. We will discuss your responses during our group meeting next week. Continue journaling.

In preparation for our final session, please allow extra time to address the following special activities:

1. Record your celebrations: where you were emotionally before participating in this group and where you think you are now. There is a place in your manual to write these. If you are willing, we can all have an opportunity to share in your celebrations at our final meeting!
2. What decisions or next steps could you take to continue your healing process?

My Journal



Session Eight

Healing doesn't mean the damage never existed. It means the damage no longer controls your life. – Akshay Dubey

GROUP MEMBER STORY

We want to take time to allow each of you to share your story in a safe, caring environment. Each week, a member of our group will share her story. As you listen, please try to think about supporting and encouraging her before you consider the connections between her story and yours. We all may need time to take in the story we will be hearing, so there may be a few moments of silence after she finishes. Any brief silence does not imply judgment.

HEATHER'S STORY

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

My life was a mess from the very beginning. My biological dad was an alcoholic and physically abusive, so my parents divorced when I was three. My mom remarried a few years later and when I was eight years old, my stepdad sexually abused me. He would get up very early and sneak into my room. I tried to just lay there pretending I was asleep and each time, after he had sexually molested me, he'd go in and shower.

The abuse went on for about a year, but its impact on my life lasted decades. I grew up overnight because of what my stepdad did to me. But I kept the abuse secret for fear of what people would think of me. Besides, I was terrified that it would devastate my mom. She had battled severe depression and anger for as long as I can remember, and I knew this would crush her. My childhood was unstable. Shame became my constant companion and I learned to stuff my feelings.

When I was in junior high, I felt like I belonged anywhere but at home. During those years, I connected my self-worth to my performance and became obsessed with perfection—on a quest to be noticed and accepted by others.

As I entered high school, I was in turmoil and concluded that there was no hope for me. I bounced between three high schools. I became infatuated with a boy and started smoking pot and cigarettes by the end of my junior year. My shame spawned bitterness and resentment. I felt miserable living this way but continued anyway, compounding my hopelessness.

Until now, I had spent my life burying the secret of my abuse. But after graduation, as I prepared to leave home for college, I feared for my little eight-year-old sister, so I told my mom about my abuse. She urged me to go to counseling, so when I arrived at college in another state, I went to

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see a counselor. When I told her of my sexual abuse, she was bound by law to report it and my stepdad went to prison for five years. (It came out that he had been sexually abused by an uncle when he was a boy.)

When my stepdad went to prison, he and my mom lost their family business and my family crumbled. As I had feared, these events plunged my mom into deep depression. And my siblings (I'm the oldest of four) were left to pick up the pieces while my mom slept for weeks at a time.

I tried to outrun my problems by moving and continued to fill my need for acceptance and fulfillment with more drugs and more guys, only to be left feeling even more worthless and empty.

I returned to my hometown and moved in with my boyfriend, Neil, less than a year later. We got pregnant twice in two years and got married. As long as Neil was happy, so was I... for a while. But my unmet, unvoiced expectations became too much for him and my emotional rollercoaster was making us both crazy. Twice during that time, I became involved in emotional affairs. It scared me that I was beginning to act like my mom. Above all else, I didn't want to be like my mom!

I would have flashbacks of the sexual abuse that I had experienced. When Neil would take a shower, my mind went back to my childhood, when I would lay in bed after my stepdad had violated me and listen as he showered. I would go on these dark rabbit trails and stay there for months. I was trapped in the mindset that I would always be broken.

The emotional baggage I had carried around for 33 years was now affecting my physical health and I was experiencing paralyzing anxiety attacks. I felt so alone.

About that time, I was invited to attend a retreat for women who were victims of childhood trauma. Through that experience, the chains of shame and guilt were broken, and I encountered healing for the first time.

For so long I had believed lies: that the abuse was my fault, that I would always be a victim, that I would never be good enough, and that I would never be worthy. But now I saw that I didn't have to live as a victim anymore. The abuse no longer had to control my life. By sharing my story openly, it was no longer lurking in the dark recesses, but was exposed to the light.

I began changing, but Neil and I continued to grow further and further apart. In his mind, all I wanted to do was change him, and his love for drugs, money, control and pride won every fight.

Once again, I slipped back into depression, numbing my pain by getting stoned. I asked Neil for a divorce after he was in a drunk driving accident, and not long after he found out about my third emotional affair. This rocked Neil and drove him to clean up his life. Meanwhile, I boldly continued my affair.

But Neil had changed. He was loving me right through all the pain I was putting him through. He pursued me daily and invited me back into relationship with him. This went on for over a month. We had a saying on our wall that said, "With God all things are possible." He asked me one day why I put it on the wall if I didn't believe it. This broke me; I could no longer deny that I was living a lie.

I broke off the affair and agreed to start over in my life and marriage with Neil. Neil and I became friends, fell in love. And over the next few years, Neil and I experienced marital bliss. We built a house, found a home church, and joined a small group.

But soon, I found myself exhausted, seeking the approval of others. I still kept the secret places of my heart off limits. And once again, I found myself in a dark place, characterized by a season of rejection, loss and grief.

So, one by one, with a crazy amount of therapy, I have demolished the lies and strongholds that kept me from fully enjoying my life. Gone are

the cigarettes, benzos, marijuana, and alcohol with which I had tried to numb my pain and escape my past. I'm no longer a victim but a victor!

DISCUSS HEATHER'S STORY

1. What were some of your feelings as you read Heather's story?
2. In what ways did Heather's abuse affect her?
3. What are the similarities you see between Heather's response to her abuse and your response to your abuse?

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 include thoughts 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.”
- “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.”

You will probably encounter other questions and doubts that will challenge your belief that you can experience healing. All the stories included in this manual demonstrate the hope and belief that anyone can find healing and recovery from sexual abuse. These women have overcome incredible odds to get where they are today. Having put in the work, they are experiencing 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, discovering 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. Think about it; when we become fearful and depressed, we generally isolate. And in our isolation, our outlook typically worsens!

Having experienced the supportive and non-judgemental community in this group, you have learned that there are many “out there” who have had experiences like yours. Each of you has learned how to share your story of sexual abuse. Carefully seek out these potential sources of comfort and healing, spending time together to build mutually beneficial relationships. An ancient proverb explains:

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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. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)¹⁷

Another important way to keep your “belief muscle” strong is to exercise it. What we mean is, keep moving forward and journal your growth. It is absolutely normal to progress incrementally at first. Monitoring your progress by journaling will help you see where you’ve experienced success and motivate you to keep going. As you look back over the hard work you have accomplished, your steps forward will strengthen your belief that you can do this.

DEBRIEF HEALING ACTION 7: BELIEVE YOU CAN EXPERIENCE HEALING

Please consider the following questions and be prepared to share your responses with the group:

1. To what extent do you believe you can be healed?
2. Please write down your Celebrations: where you were emotionally before participating in this group and where you think you are now. We want to celebrate the progress you have made and, if you are comfortable, will give you an opportunity to share what you wrote during our final meeting.

¹⁷ *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. 2015. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publications.

Victims No More

- a. Before joining my SAVAnon group, I was...

 - b. After joining SAVAnon, I feel...

 - c. This group has helped me...
-
3. Healing occurs along a continuum, from victim to survivor to more than a survivor—an overcomer or even a warrior! The process is fluid; it is perfectly normal to feel like a warrior in one aspect of your healing but feel nowhere close to that in another area. In what area of your healing do you see yourself ready and able to move forward along this continuum?

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 *Victims No More* 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.

1. Make an appointment to see a counselor, especially if you have identified any self-destructive behaviors. If you suspect that you have repressed memories or

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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.

2. Consider asking one or more of the women in your group to meet with you as a confidant. Keep journaling your progress and share your joys and struggles with each other. Hold each other accountable and support one another.
3. You may wish to go through *Victims No More* a second time. Healing from sexual abuse often occurs in layers, so you may find it helpful to repeat this experience with another group of women. If past abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth are part of your story, consider joining an AbAnon or MiSAnon group. Go to www.srtservices.org to enroll in an upcoming group. An intake coordinator will contact you.
4. Talk with your facilitators; share with them where you are in your progress and ask them to suggest other possible next steps.
5. 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. Keep in mind that the healing process is seldom linear, and we commend you for all the hard work you have put in. It's encouraging to see your progress! Just having you in our group has contributed greatly to the healing of us all!

Appendix

DISSOCIATION & SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE

WARNING:

The story that follows is graphic and may trigger traumatic feelings.

DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is a defense mechanism in which the trauma was so horrific that the brain assigns those incidents to alternate 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.

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

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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 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.

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 a licensed professional counselor who specializes in helping women recover from trauma and sexual abuse. Jasmine 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.

