



Post-Traumatic Stress

Presentation By:

Brad Hambrick, M.Div., Th.M.

Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church



“Post-Traumatic Stress”

Table of Contents

Introduction:

What Can I Hope to Get from this Seminar?	3
Where Do I Begin?	4
What are Freedom Groups?	5
The 9 Steps of Freedom Groups	6

Chapter 1. “There Seems to Be No Place to Rest” PREPARE yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually to face your suffering	7
---	---

Chapter 2 “I Can’t Forget and Don’t Want to Remember” ACKNOWLEDGE the specific history and realness of my suffering	13
--	----

Chapter 3. “What Are the ‘Invisible Injuries’ I’ve Suffered?” UNDERSTAND the impact of my suffering	22
--	----

Chapter 4. “God Is Dead, Life Is Meaningless, or I Am Crazy” LEARN MY SUFFERING STORY which I used to make sense of my experience	30
--	----

Chapter 5. “I Will Trust God with My Tears” MOURN the wrongness of what happened and receive God’s comfort	38
---	----

Chapter 6. “Accepting Challenges to Overcome Them in God’s Strength” LEARN MY GOSPEL STORY by which God gives meaning to my experience	45
---	----

Chapter 7. “Re-Engaging Life and Relationships” IDENTIFY GOALS that allow me to combat the impact of my suffering	54
--	----

Chapter 8. “The Anti-Climactic of the Post-Traumatic” PERSEVERE in the new life and identity to which God has called me	66
--	----

Chapter 9. “Learning to Live ‘For’ Instead of ‘In Response To’ Again” STEWARDSHIP all of my life for God’s glory	73
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Appendices

A. Understanding and Responding to Secondary Traumatic Stress	78
B. First Aid Counsel for a Suicidal Friend	79
C. What Do I Do Now?	80

What Can I Hope to Get From this Seminar?

Whether you are here due to personal need, the needs of others, or for a general interest in the topic, we hope this seminar will benefit you. If we do our job well, parts of this seminar will speak to you personally. There will also be parts that speak to aspects of this subject that are different from your own experience. What follows are **six unavoidable facts** that should help you profit from all of the material you hear (bold faced text taken from Paul Tripp and Tim Lane *How People Change*):

1. Someone in your life had a problem this week. That person may be you. Even if you are here for yourself, chances are you know or will know others who struggle in this area. Because we live in a fallen world and have a sin nature, we can be certain that we will battle with sin and suffering in our lives. Because we love people, we can be certain we will be called on to love and assist others in their battle with sin and suffering.

2. We have everything we need in the Gospel to help that person (2 Peter 1:3). God has given us Himself, the Gospel, the Bible, and the church and promised they are effective for all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our task as Christians is to grow in our understanding of and ability to skillfully apply these resources to our struggles. These resources are the essence and source of "good advice," and we hope to play a role in your efforts to apply and disseminate this "good advice." We do not aim to present new material, but new ways of applying the timeless, eternal truths of the Gospel found in Scripture.

3. That person will seek help from friends, family members, or pastors before seeking professionals. Counseling (broadly defined as seeking to offer hope and direction through relationship) happens all the time. We talk with friends over the phone, crying children in their rooms, spouses in the kitchen, fellow church members between services, and have endless conversations with ourselves. We listen to struggles, seek to understand, offer perspective, give advice, and follow up later. This is what the New Testament calls "one-anothering" and something we are all called to do.

4. That person either got no help, bad help, or biblical, gospel-centered help. Not all counseling is good counseling. Not all advice that we receive from a Christian (even a Christian counselor) is Christian advice. Too often we are advised to look within for the answers to our problems or told that we are good enough, strong enough, or smart enough in ourselves to overcome. Hopefully you will see today how the Bible calls us to something (rather Someone) better, bigger, and more effective than these messages.

5. If they did not get meaningful help, they will go elsewhere. When we do not receive good advice (pointing us to enduring life transformation), we keep looking. We need answers to our struggles. This means that as people find unfulfilling answers they will eventually (by God's grace) come to a Christian for advice. When they eventually come to you, we hope you will be more prepared because of our time together today.

6. Whatever help they received, they will use to help others! We become evangelists for the things that make life better (this is why the Gospel is simply called "Good News"). We quite naturally share the things that we find to be effective. Our prayer for you today is that you will find the material presented effective for your struggles and that you will be so comforted and encouraged by it that it will enable you to be a more passionate and effective ambassador of the Gospel in the midst of "normal" daily conversations.

“Where Do I Begin?”

In life and counseling, finding the starting point can be difficult. Life is fluid enough that identifying where to begin with a life-dominating struggle can feel like finding the beginning of a circle. In order to help you with this very important question, Freedom Groups have developed a progression of five levels of starting points.

A struggle in one of the higher categories may have many expressions or contributing causes in the lower categories, but unless the upper level concerns are addressed first (i.e., substance abuse should be addressed before conflict resolution skills), efforts at change have a low probability of lasting success. The degree of self-awareness usually increases as you go down the page. The level of denial usually increases as you move up the page.

1. **Safety** – When the basic requirements of safety are not present, then safety takes priority over any other concern. Safety is never an “unfair expectation” from a relationship. If safety is a concern, then you should immediately involve other people (i.e., pastor, counselor, or legal authorities).

This category includes: thoughts of suicide, violence, threats of violence (to people or pets), preventing someone from moving freely in their home, destruction of property, manipulation, coercion, and similar practices.

2. **Substance Abuse / Addiction** – After safety, the use of mind or mood altering substances is the next level of priority concern. Substance abuse makes the life situation worse and inhibits any maturation process. The consistency and stability required for lasting change are disrupted by substance abuse. **The mentoring and Freedom Group materials for the sexual sin seminar can be applied to an addiction level struggle.**

This category includes: alcohol, illegal drugs, prescription drug not used according to instructions, inhalants, driving any vehicle with any impairment for any distance, and similar activities.

3. **Trauma** – Past or present events resulting in nightmares, sleeplessness, flashbacks, sense of helplessness, restricted emotional expression, difficulty concentrating, high levels of anxiety, intense feelings of shame, or a strong desire to isolate should be dealt with before trying to refine matters of character or skill. Trauma is a form of suffering that negatively shapes someone’s sense of identity and causes them to begin to constantly expect or brace against the worst.

This category includes: any physical or sexual abuse, significant verbal or emotional abuse, exposure to an act of violence, experience of a disaster, a major loss, or similar experience.

4. **Character** – This refers to persistent dispositions that express themselves in a variety of ways in a variety of settings. Because both the “trigger” and manifestation change regularly and hide when convenient, it is clear that the struggle lies within the core values, beliefs, and priorities of the individual. Skill training alone will not change character. **The mentoring and Freedom Group materials for the sexual sin seminar can be applied to a character level struggle.**

This category includes: anger, bitterness, fear, greed, jealousy, obsessions, hoarding, envy, laziness, selfishness, pornography, codependency, depression, social anxiety, insecurity, and similar dispositions.

5. **Skill** – With skill level changes there will be a high degree of self-awareness that change is needed in the moment when change is needed. However, confusion or uncertainty prevents an individual from being able to respond in a manner that it is wise and appropriate.

This category includes: conflict resolution, time management, budgeting, planning, and similar skills.

Hopefully, after reading these five points, you will have less of a “jump in anywhere and try anything” mentality towards your struggles. Change is hard but knowing where to start helps to establish confidence. Remember, you are not alone. Christ will meet you and the church will walk with you at any of these five points.

WHAT ARE FREEDOM GROUPS?

Freedom groups are struggle-specific small groups where individuals commit to investing a season of their life in overcoming a particular life-dominating struggle of sin or suffering.

Bible-Based & Gospel-Centered: Programs and information do not change people. God changes people through the power of the Gospel and the wisdom of His Word. The relational structure of Freedom Groups is the vehicle God has ordained to transport the Gospel and Scripture into the lives of His beloved, enslaved, and hurting children.

Recognize the Difference Between Sin & Suffering: Freedom Groups recognize that struggles of sin are different from struggles of suffering in terms of cause, dynamics, emotional impact, relational influence, and other ways. While every believer is simultaneously a saint, sinner, and sufferer, there are fundamental differences (practically and theologically) between a struggle an individual does (sin) and those that happen to the individual (suffering).

Built On Honesty & Transparency: The courage to be honest about our suffering or sin is often the essential expression of faith God calls for in overcoming a life-dominating struggle. Freedom Groups create an environment that fosters honesty and transparency by incarnating the love of God and protecting confidentiality within the group.

Issue Specific: We do not advocate a one-size-fits-all approach to life struggles because of the tendency of such programs to become cliché or offer generic advice. Christ bears many names, has many titles, and serves many roles. Freedom Groups uphold the breadth of Christ as greater than the complexity of life. We believe our Savior is as personal as our struggles and service to Him is the only way from bondage to freedom.

Gender Specific: During a time of intense struggle and personal sharing having members of both genders in a group is unnecessarily distracting and, in many cases, can exacerbate the struggle or stifle genuine sharing.

Time Limited: Freedom Groups have recommended durations for each group based upon the time necessary to *solidify* change on a given subject.

Avoid Struggle-Based Identity: We recognize that when an individual has struggled with one issue for an extended period of time that struggle begins to define them. Freedom Groups are structured in content, duration, and philosophy to alert the participants to this temptation and guide them away from it. Freedom Groups strive to teach and model what it means to live out of an identity as a dearly loved child of God.

Embedded Within the Church: Freedom Groups are not a "program" put on by the counseling ministry, but a part of church life. Recovery groups that become a program, tend to diminish the confidence of the participants in the ability of the church to understand and its willingness to care about their struggle.

Blend Discipleship, Accountability, & A Guided Process: Freedom Groups are more than a Bible study on a given subject. They develop a practical theology of their subject during the group study and guide members through an intentional process during the personal study while the members hold each other accountable.

Transition Into Larger Small Group Ministry: The goal is for each Freedom Group member to be in a general small group within a year. Group members may choose to be a general small group the whole time. If desired, at "graduation" the Freedom Group leader would direct the participant to a small group with a leader who has completed personal study and counseling exercises for that area of struggle. It would be the participant's choice whether to disclose that was the reason for choosing that leader's small group.

The 9 Steps of Freedom Groups

We do not believe there is a one-size-fits-all solution to the struggles of life. Neither do we believe there is any magic in these particular steps. However, we do believe that these steps capture the major movements of the Gospel in the life of an individual. We also believe that it is through the Gospel that God transforms lives and modifies behavior as He gives us a new heart.

In Freedom Groups we attempt to walk through the Gospel in slow motion with a concentrated focus upon a particular life-dominating struggle. We do this in a setting of transparent community because we believe God changes people in the midst of relationships.

We believe that the Gospel speaks to both sin (things we do wrong) and suffering (painful experiences for which we are not responsible) to bring peace, wholeness, and redemption. We also believe that every person is both a sinner and a sufferer. However, we believe the Gospel is best understood and applied when we consider how the Gospel relates to the nature of our struggle. The nine steps below are those used by Freedom Groups to address struggles of sin.

Sin-Based Groups	Suffering-Based Groups
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 1. ADMIT I have a struggle I cannot overcome without God.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 1. PREPARE yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually to face your suffering.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 2. ACKNOWLEDGE the breadth and impact of my sin.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 2. ACKNOWLEDGE the specific history and realness of my suffering.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 3. UNDERSTAND the origin, motive, and history of my sin.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 3. UNDERSTAND the impact of my suffering.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 4. REPENT TO GOD for how my sin replaced and misrepresented Him.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 4. LEARN MY SUFFERING STORY which I use to make sense of my experience.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 5. CONFESS TO THOSE AFFECTED for harm done and seek to make amends.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 5. MOURN the wrongness of what happened and receive God’s comfort.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 6. RESTRUCTURE MY LIFE to rely on God’s grace and Word to transform my life.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 6. LEARN MY GOSPEL STORY by which God gives meaning to my experience.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 7. IMPLEMENT the new structure pervasively with humility and flexibility.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 7. IDENTIFY GOALS that allow me to combat the impact of my suffering.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 8. PERSEVERE in the new life and identity to which God has called me.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 8. PERSEVERE in the new life and identity to which God has called me.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 9. STEWARD all of my life for God’s glory.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">STEP 9. STEWARD all of my life for God’s glory.</p>

To learn more about Freedom Groups visit www.summitrdu.com/counseling

Chapter I

“There Seems to Be No Place to Rest”

PREPARE yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually to face your suffering.

“Trying to deny or forget my traumatic experience would be either futile or costly. God is good for bringing me to the point in my journey even though the trauma was evil. Therefore, I will put myself in the best physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual position possible to face the residual impact of my suffering by God’s grace.”

Memorize: Matthew 11:28-30 (ESV), “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Come to me” – Jesus wants to give you more than an answer or a process. He offers Himself.
- “Are heavy laden” – Trauma and its aftermath is intense. God recognizes the weight of this journey.
- “I will give you rest... for your souls” – God wants to give his children rest at the deepest part of our being.
- “Learn from me” – Jesus is well-acquainted with the journey ahead of you (Isaiah 53:3). He knows the way.
- “I am gentle” – Jesus will travel this journey at a pace you can bear. His concern is for you.

Teaching Notes

“Read any part of the Bible, and you will see that horrific, traumatic events have been part of the world since the fall of humanity into sin and suffering. Life in this world is full of trauma, suffering, and hurt. Yet it is within this context that the God of grace meets people and gives them hope, comfort, and courage to face the uncertainties of life (p. 9-10).” Tim Lane in *PTSD*

“Experiencing authentic Christian community is one of the most important ways shame-based lies about oneself can be challenged (p. 90).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“It’s true that the ‘heart knows its own bitterness’ (Proverbs 14:10), and even your dearest friend can’t fully understand the terror, the aloneness, the pain, and the horror you experienced. But Jesus does understand, and he is with you (p. 5).” David Powlison in *Recovering from Child Abuse*

“She may need some practical suggestions for how to manage both anxiety and depression. Few clients know that a regular program of exercise can be beneficial for both of these. Exercise can sometimes help lift the depression physiologically and reduce anxiety as well. Entering into an exercise program is often the first experience a client has of assuming control over her own body (p. 118).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

“It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asked is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, ask the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, encouragement, and remembering (p. 7-8).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“You will want someone who allows you to be honest about your struggles, that makes you feel safe at the same time. If you are not careful and you begin to process memories with someone who is not skilled enough, it could make things worse (p. 18).” Tim Lane in *PTSD*

Embedded Study

Thank you for the courage represented in your willingness to engage this material. After a trauma any act of recovery, which involves memory, can be very frightening. While you may not feel courageous, it is important to remember – courage is not the absence of fear, but facing your fears wisely. This material is designed to help you do that.

“Often it is necessary... to reframe accepting help as an act of courage. Acknowledging the reality of one's condition and taking steps to change it become signs of strength, not weakness; initiative, not passivity. Taking action to foster recovery, far from granting victory to the abuser, empowers the survivor (p. 159).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

For the moment, we will simply define trauma as an event that is more than we are prepared to handle at the time we experience it; resulting in prolonged emotional, relational, and spiritual disruption. This event might be exposure to war conditions, abuse, natural disasters, or comparable events. In the next chapter we will provide a more robust definition of trauma based on the symptoms it produces.

Take your time going through this material and take as many breaks as necessary. You were not in control during your experience of trauma. You are in control during the recovery process. Here are several suggestions for how to use this material.

- *Read only in small bits and stop when you have had enough.* This allows you to reinforce the idea that you have voice and control in the process of recovery.
- *Write down your thoughts as you read.* This allows you to relax and not mentally rehearse insights you gain from the study.
- *Do not read at night.* Do all that you can to protect your sleep patterns while going through this study.

Where Are We Going?

One goal of this study will be to minimize surprises. You have had enough experiences that were unpredictable; the unknown understandably feels unsafe. The nine steps of this material can be thought of as representing three stages of recovery.

“Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. Like any abstract concept, the stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally. They are an attempt to impose simplicity and order on a process that is inherently turbulent and complex (p. 155).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Stage One: Establish Safety (Steps 1-3)

1. *PREPARE yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually to face your suffering.* In this step, we want you to understand the journey of facing your suffering and place yourself in the best position to complete the journey well.
2. *ACKNOWLEDGE the specific history and realness of my suffering.* In this step, we want you to learn to feel safe while remembering the events you experienced.
3. *UNDERSTAND the impact of my suffering.* In this step, we want you to grasp (a) why past trauma can have so many present effects, and (b) the factors that contribute to the impact of the specific trauma you experienced.

Stage Two: Disempower the Memory (Steps 4-6)

4. *LEARN MY SUFFERING STORY which I use to make sense of my experience.* In this step, we want you to identify the false, destructive messages you attached to your trauma that give it greater impact in your life.
5. *MOURN the wrongness of what happened and receive God's comfort.* In this step, we want you to grieve the wrongness of your trauma in a way that emotionally distances you from the destructive messages of step four.
6. *LEARN MY GOSPEL STORY by which God gives meaning to my experience.* In this step, we want you to experience God's presence and care even when you remember the harshness of your trauma.

Stage Three: Re-Connect with Life and Relationships (Steps 7-9)

7. *IDENTIFY GOALS that allow me to combat the impact of my suffering.* In this step, we want you to select strategies that will reclaim areas of life that have been dominated by or neglected because of your trauma.
8. *PERSEVERE in the new life and identity to which God has called me.* In this step, we want you to identify those life practices that are most essential for you sustaining the growth that will have been established at this point.
9. *STEWARDSHIP all of my life for God's glory.* In this step, we want to ensure you realize that God wants to see you flourish as you fulfill all the purposes for which he created you.

"But life is not this neat...?!" You are right. Memories come before we can establish a sense of safety. We must engage life and relationships before we are able to disempower memories. This was already happening before you had a plan. This outline should help you better understand why things are harder than they should be until you get to that point in your journey.

"I don't think I can do all of this!?" Don't get overwhelmed. Just because you've seen the map doesn't mean you need to take the whole journey. The map is meant to reduce surprises; not create pressure. Right now you are still preparing for the journey, which is why we ask...

Where Do I Begin?

It is easy to think of this question as, "What should I do?" But that is not what God asks of you. Your first step is not one of overcoming, but preparing. This means God wants you to put yourself in the best physical, emotional, and relational position possible for the journey ahead.

God is more concerned about you, as His child, than He is about the destination of a fully processed trauma. If you are going to complete the journey, you will need to allow yourself to be cared for by God and others.

Read 1 Kings 19:1-8. Elijah is facing the suffering of being persecuted and he is facing it alone (at least to his knowledge). Notice the first thing God does for His discouraged child – God lets him sleep and feeds him (v. 5), then God acknowledged the "journey is too great for you (v. 7)" as a way of encouraging Elijah. No longer did Elijah need to feel like he should be able to do this on his own. No longer did Elijah have to express his thoughts as if God did not understand (as in v. 3-4). By allowing Elijah to prepare physically, God demonstrated He understood Elijah's limits.

Read Psalm 3:3-5. In this Psalm David is on the run for his life (v. 1-2). Notice what God does first for His child – God lifts his chin out of shame (v. 3), listens to his cries (v. 4), and gives David sleep (v. 5). David knows he would not sleep at a time like this apart from God's giving him rest. God's involvement was not restricted to the approaching army. God began by preparing His child for what was ahead by giving David sleep.

So what does this mean for you? It means the place where God would have you begin is to care for yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As you do this, you are not being selfish. You are experiencing God's love for you as you cooperate with his will for your life at this time.

Reflection: As you seek to apply items from the list below, regularly call to mind that God loves you and wants this time of restoration for you. God is not impatiently rushing you to begin being active for Him again (as if He cherished your productivity more than your person).

Question: How do you respond when you hear that God wants you to prepare for the grief journey ahead more than he wants you to be "productive"? Are you able to receive this as an indication of His love and compassion for you?

Areas of Preparation

It is difficult to break the silence of trauma. It can feel like opening Pandora's box to let someone else in to what you've been experiencing. There is the fear of, "Can I turn the memories off once I start to think about what happened?" This is why we don't start with memory work.

We start by establishing some rhythms and routines to life that allow you to return to a sense of safety even if later parts of this seminar take you through some hard times. Remember, take a break from this study whenever you need to in order to re-establish the sense of safety.

1. **“Home Base”** – Beginning and ending your day in a place that feels safe is an important life rhythm to establish. Creating the expectation that you will “book end” whatever stress you face during the day with safety does a great deal to establish an over-arching sense of safety to your life.
 - Wake up in time to have an unrushed start to your day.
 - Arrange your home so that your most frequently used items are easy to find.
 - Avoid movies or forms of entertainment with high violence or drama content.
 - Play music that you find soothing and reveal your personal taste.
 - Use ear plugs or white noise machines if outside noises are disturbing.
 - Have an evening “wind down” routine that prepares you to sleep.
2. **Body Management** – Your body is also a type of “home” for your mind. Caring for your body well places your mind in the best context to face the challenges of post-traumatic stress. The actions listed below both (a) increase your body’s ability to withstand stress and (b) demonstrate your ability to impact important factors related to your stress.

“Establishing safety begins by focusing on control of the body and gradually moves outward towards control of the environment. Issues of bodily integrity include attention to basic health needs, regulation of bodily functions such as sleep, eating, and exercise, management of posttraumatic symptoms, and control of self-destructive behaviors. Environmental issues include the establishment of a safe living situation, financial security, mobility, and a plan for self-protection that encompasses the full range of the patient’s daily life. Because no one can establish a safe environment alone, the task of developing an adequate safety plan always includes a component of social support (p. 160).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

- a. **Sleep** – There are two ways in which sleep is an important part of good self-care. First, sleep is one of the primary ways that we maintain a rhythm to life. It is hard for life to have any sense of routine if we do not have a regular sleep pattern. Second, sleep is one of the primary ways that the brain replenishes itself. Sleep does for the brain what exercise does for the body. When we do not get sufficient sleep, emotional regulation of any kind becomes increasingly difficult.
 - Play soft music to help prevent your mind from drift-thinking while trying to sleep.
 - Reduce the level of caffeine and sugar in your diet, especially after the noon hour.
 - Avoid daytime naps so that your sleep is in concentrated blocks; the physiological benefits of sleep are less when we break our sleep into smaller units.
 - Establish a bed time routine to help habituate your body towards sleep.
 - Try muscle relaxation exercises or a warm bath before going to bed.
 - Establish a deep slow breathing pattern that simulates sleep breathing.
 - Talk with a medical professional about the possibility of a sleep aid.
- b. **Diet** – Hunger creates a sense of unrest that the body interprets as danger. Over or under eating reveals that we are surrendering control of a fundamental part of our life to trauma. A healthy diet can be a “declaration of independence” that we make three times a day that the effects of trauma will not regulate our lives.
 - If you’ve lost your appetite, eat several small meals throughout the day instead of three big ones.
 - Take a multi-vitamin.
 - Consider a Vitamin C booster for your immune system; stress causes the body to pull energy reserves from the immune system.
 - Avoid excessive sweets or caffeine. These will impact blood sugar levels and impact your sleep cycle; both of which makes emotional regulation more difficult.
- c. **Exercise** – Trauma can leave us prone to both depression and anxiety. Exercise, particularly cardiovascular exercise, is good for countering both. Exercise cleanses the body of free radicals generated by depression-anxiety, boosts energy levels, improves sleep, and facilitates a more pro-active attitude towards life.

What are ways that you can introduce three to five occurrences of cardio vascular exercise into your week?

- d. **Relaxation Breaks** – Consider moments of relaxation or recreation as “oasis points” in your day. When you intentionally plant these breaks into your day, you are preventing the impact of trauma from cascading across your day. You are building small dams that break the tide of trauma’s influence.

What are some types of relaxation or recreation you can begin at set intervals in your day? _____

3. **Community** – There are two realities about the role of community after trauma: one good, the other bad.

“Experiencing authentic Christian community is one of the most important ways shame-based lies about oneself can be challenged (p. 90).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“You will want someone who allows you to be honest about your struggles that makes you feel safe at the same time. If you are not careful and you begin to process memories with someone who is not skilled enough, it could make things worse (p. 18).” Tim Lane in *PTSD*

This material is designed to facilitate helpful relationship with other people who can play a vital role in your recovery process. While a counseling professional can be a great asset on this journey, someone does not have to have advanced degrees to be a good friend in hard times.

- Make a list of the people you believe would be safe to engage with about your post-traumatic journey.

- Make a list of the people you believe might not be safe to engage with about your post-traumatic journey.

- Use these criteria to help you decide who to place on each list.
 - A safe person listens well even when they do not know what to say.
 - A safe person is willing to learn about the experience of trauma to be more understanding.
 - A safe person realizes they cannot rescue you from post-traumatic experiences.
 - A safe person does not take the fear or anger of your trauma personally.
 - A safe person directs you to safe, honoring choices even when you’re upset.
 - A safe person can discern when you’re “just upset” and when you’re “a danger to yourself.”
 - A safe person is willing to involve others (i.e., calling 911) if you’re in a danger to yourself or others.

4. **Medication** – Post-traumatic stress is caused by life events not brain chemistry. But medication can still be an effective tool in minimizing some of the acute experiences of stress (i.e., panic attacks or flashbacks) and mitigating some of the pervasive experience of anxiety (i.e., hypervigilance) that is common after a trauma. Talking with a physician can be a wise step of ensuring that the stress related to processing trauma is not unduly disruptive to your life.

5. **Expectations** – What are your expectations about what this journey will be like? It can be helpful to articulate those now, so that you do not grow unnecessarily frustrated with yourself along the way.

Here are some realistic expectations for yourself on this journey.

- You will have good days and bad days.
- The early stages of this process are the most difficult and may involve the recurrence of remitted symptoms.
- You will need to take a break several times during the course of this journey.
- You will wish the entire process could just move a little faster.

- You won't notice growth until you're startled by how much you've grown.
- You will frequently wonder if it's "worth it."
- You may never know "why" the trauma happened (i.e., "God's purpose behind it all").
- You will learn that, by God's grace, you're stronger than you ever imagined.
- You will learn to cherish the fact that you don't always have to be strong to be safe in God's care.
- You can expect that life will be better and your trauma won't get "the last word" on your life.

Here are some indicators that you need to take a break from this study.

- Your sleep pattern is disrupted for more than three days in a row.
- The frequency of symptoms like nightmares and flashbacks increase in frequency.
- You sense yourself pulling away from your safe relationships and enjoyable activities.
- You begin to experience persistent physical symptoms like irritable bowel.
- You begin to feel hopeless and consider suicide.

Any of these are indicators that you are pushing yourself too far, too fast in the recovery process. If you are considering suicide, or if the other symptoms do not subside after a couple of days, break from the study, consult with a professional counselor or physician before resuming the study.

Conclusion

Be encouraged. What you are doing is wise and good, even if it is the hardest thing you ever do. If you are going to engage something that is difficult, then it's important to know that the endeavor is worthwhile. Learning how God wants to care for and direct you after the experience of trauma is definitely worthwhile.

“After establishing safety, one of the first things abuse victims must do to begin to heal is to decide, based on the truth of Scripture, it's better to face the pain than to numb it, and it's better to face the truth than to distort reality (p. 145).”
Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

At the end of each step, we provide a few questions we would like an accountability-encouragement partner to be asking you as you take this journey. This person could be a pastor, counselor, friend, or small group member. Use this as a way to educate that part of your support network about what they can do to help.

Encouragement Focus (PREPARE):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- Which of the five areas of preparation are you strongest? Weakest?
- What area of preparation seems most important for you to maintain?
- What is something you enjoy doing which I could encourage you to engage with more?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 2

I Can't Forget and Don't Want to Remember

ACKNOWLEDGE the specific history and realness of my suffering.

"I will look at my life and acknowledge what has happened as my history.

I will not try to move forward out of a false history or with no history.

I trust that God can and will redeem what is and what has been.

Evidencing my faith in God I acknowledged my specific history to [name; counselor or group].

This brought great fear [describe] and then relief [describe]."

Memorize: Psalm 102:4-11 (ESV), "My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread. Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh. I am like a desert owl of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places; I lie awake; I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. All the day my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink, because of your indignation and anger; for you have taken me up and thrown me down. My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass." As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- Psalm 102 – God placed this psalm in Scripture so you would know you could be honest with him and yourself.
- "Heart is struck down" – The memory of what the psalmist experienced immediately saps his strength.
- "Desert owl" – The imagery of these two birds is meant to convey the utter aloneness felt by the psalmist.
- "I lie awake" – The psalmist's memories leaves him both powerless and unable to sleep (feeling unable to recuperate).
- "You have... thrown me down" – The psalmist feels like God is spiking him like a football as a punishment.

Teaching Notes

"Though the single most common therapeutic error is avoidance of the traumatic material, probably the second most common error is premature or precipitate engagement in exploratory work, without sufficient attention to the task of establishing safety in securing a therapeutic alliance (p. 172)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

"The damages suffered may have been done in one or more terrible moments; the healing and restoration unfolds at a human pace. It unfolds at your pace. It unfolds as a part of your story, and it unfolds over time (p. 3)." David Powlison in *Recovering from Child Abuse*

"Abuse victims and those who seek to minister to them must understand the way abuse impacts the soul before a plan for healing can be mapped out. All too often, well-meaning Christians spout Bible verses to cure very complex problems such as abuse. Scripture does give us a path to healing, but we cannot use Scripture properly until we have a keen grasp of the nature of abuse and the damage that needs to be healed (p. 12-13)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

"Denial is an affront to God. It assumes that a false reality is better than the truth. It assumes that God is neither good nor strong enough to help during the recall process. Ultimately, the choice to face the past memories is a choice not to live a lie (p. 202)." Dan Allender in *The Wounded Heart*

"Part of being in the truth is calling things by their right names. That means evil is not 'just a little mistake,' and lies are not 'fudging' (p. 79)." Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

"The purpose of memory work is to afford the survivor a safe place in which to tell the truth about her life so that truth can be integrated into the whole of her life and its accompanying lies can be exposed (p. 124-125)." Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

"When we remember the past, it is not only past; it breaks into the present and gains a new lease on life (p. 21)... Because we can react to our memories and shape them, we are larger than our memories. If our reaction to our memories were determined simply by the memories themselves, then we would be slaves of the past (p. 25)." Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

Embedded Study

There is nothing “fun” or enjoyable about this step. However, it is a good and needed part of the process. But do not allow these first two statements to cause you to think, “Alright then, let’s get it over with as quickly as possible.” That would be a mistake that could result in re-traumatizing yourself.

“Though the single most common therapeutic error is avoidance of the traumatic material, probably the second most common error is premature or precipitate engagement in exploratory work, without sufficient attention to the task of establishing safety in securing a therapeutic alliance (p. 172)... Therapy always involves juggling the survivor’s need to face what has happened and her need to feel safe. To tell is to feel unsafe. To remain silent is to be stuck and alone (p. 164).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

Before engaging with the material in step two, please be sure you’ve firmly established the sense of safety that was the focus of step one. Significantly more so than any other seminar, thoroughly completing step one before starting step two is important when dealing with post-traumatic stress. Realize that God wants to see you made whole at a pace you can endure.

“The damages suffered may have been done in one or more terrible moments; the healing and restoration unfolds at a human pace. It unfolds at your pace. It unfolds as a part of your story, and it unfolds over time (p. 3).” David Powlison in *Recovering from Child Abuse*

In this chapter we will examine three subjects to help you acknowledge the history and realness of your trauma. These are arranged in an intentional chronological order; beginning with present symptoms and moving towards past events. The purpose of this order is to allow you to better put into words the experience of PTSD so that you can better invite support from others as you may experience an initial increase in symptoms as you work on this step.

Note: It is not advised that you work on this step in isolation. Having a support network, preferably both caring friends and an experienced counselor, is recommended.

1. **PTSD Assessment** – This will help you understand the different types of common responses to trauma. It is meant to help you feel less “crazy” when you have experiences that might otherwise cause you to question your mental-emotional state. Remember, the symptoms of PTSD are a normal response to an abnormal circumstance.
2. **PTSD Daily Symptom Chart** – This will help you monitor your experience of PTSD as you work through these materials. When you see spikes in your post-traumatic symptoms, take a break from the study. Allow your emotions to settle and re-establish your sense of safety (step one material) before resuming.
3. **Key Questions** – In this section we will examine four questions: (a) To whom is it beneficial for me to acknowledge what happened? (b) In what level of detail do these acknowledgements need to occur? (c) When is it beneficial to begin this process; how do I know if I’m ready? (d) What benefits can I expect from this step?

PTSD Assessment

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(N) almost never, (R) rarely, (S) sometimes, (F) frequently, or (A) almost always.

A self-scoring on-line version of this evaluation can be found at: bradhambrick.com/ptsd.

1. I put more effort into making sure my surroundings are predictable since my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
2. I have a harder time concentrating on conversations or tasks than I did before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
3. I consistently scan my surroundings looking for things that could go wrong or be dangerous.	N	R	S	F	A
4. Rest does not come natural to me. It is harder to enjoy “down time” after my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
5. I am more sensitive to changes in light, sound, and touch than I was before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
6. Small problems and annoyances seem much more threatening after my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
7. It is harder to calm myself after I get upset since I experienced my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
8. My decision making has become more impulsive and reactionary since my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
9. Not being in control is much more unsettling than it was before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
10. I get upset more quickly, more intensely, and about more things since my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
11. There are experiences related to my trauma that create a heightened response.	N	R	S	F	A
12. I lose considerable control of my emotions around things that remind me of my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
13. I don’t understand why I respond to certain things more strongly than I used to.	N	R	S	F	A

14. Certain sounds, smells, and sensations come with strong memories of my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
15. Themes in movies or television related to my trauma now create a heightened response.	N	R	S	F	A
16. My memories of the trauma can feel more like “reliving” than “recalling” the experience.	N	R	S	F	A
17. I lose my sense of space and time (feeling disoriented) with greater frequency.	N	R	S	F	A
18. The sounds, smells, and depictions of my trauma memories are very strong and real.	N	R	S	F	A
19. My trauma memories are so real I have to remind myself of what is past and present.	N	R	S	F	A
20. My memories of the trauma can seem “more real” than the physical world around me.	N	R	S	F	A
21. I dread going to sleep because of how powerless and vulnerable it makes me feel.	N	R	S	F	A
22. I have dreams that replay aspects of the trauma I experienced.	N	R	S	F	A
23. I have dreams different from my trauma, but with themes of powerlessness and despair.	N	R	S	F	A
24. I sometimes wake up frightened but with no recollection of what I had been dreaming.	N	R	S	F	A
25. I move a lot and give signs of franticness when I am asleep.	N	R	S	F	A
26. I am withdrawing from people at times I would have been social before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
27. I am avoiding activities I would have engaged before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
28. I can tell there are changes in my personality that are adverse to social settings.	N	R	S	F	A
29. Large groups of people make me much more unsettled than they did before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
30. I avoid forms of entertainment or recreation that I previously enjoyed.	N	R	S	F	A
31. I often cannot feel emotions as strongly as I did before my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
32. My ability to enjoy life feels muted or impeded.	N	R	S	F	A
33. I do not feel capable of “feeling” the love I have for my family and friends.	N	R	S	F	A
34. There are times a situation calls for a particular emotional response and I feel frozen.	N	R	S	F	A
35. I find myself frequently “stuck” wondering what I should be feeling.	N	R	S	F	A
36. I sometimes feel separated from my own experience, as if I am watching myself.	N	R	S	F	A
37. I feel detached from my own reactions to things, wondering what I’ll do next.	N	R	S	F	A
38. I sometimes hurt myself to create a sense of being separate from my own experience.	N	R	S	F	A
39. I sometimes escalate an argument or engage in dangerous behavior for the relief it provides.	N	R	S	F	A
40. When life is really stressful I sometimes “black out” and forget blocks of time.	N	R	S	F	A
41. I feel like my trauma has changed me in a way that makes me “less than” others.	N	R	S	F	A
42. I often feel like people know what’s happened to me and judge me because of it.	N	R	S	F	A
43. I feel like if I share what happened, I will burden or “contaminate” others.	N	R	S	F	A
44. I daydream about who “I would have been” if this never happened.	N	R	S	F	A
45. When I feel rejected, I wonder if it’s because of something related to my trauma.	N	R	S	F	A
46. The way I tell stories often leaves out important events that would change the whole story.	N	R	S	F	A
47. People say I’m manipulative because of how I “frame” many of the things I say.	N	R	S	F	A
48. I overlook really important factors that I know are true because they don’t fit how I feel.	N	R	S	F	A
49. Living as if my trauma never happened made me good at living as if many things didn’t happen.	N	R	S	F	A
50. I am good at pretending the world is as I want it to be and trying to get others to live in it.	N	R	S	F	A

Key to Survey Scoring: Give yourself one point for an “S” response, two points for an “F” response, and three points for an “A” response. If your total score matches the total number of questions in a given subset, that is an area of concern. If your total score comes close to doubling the total number of questions, it is a significant concern. If your total score more than doubles the total number of questions, it should be considered a life-dominating struggle.

A self-scoring, on-line version of this evaluation can be found at: bradhambrick.com/ptsd.

The classic definition of post-traumatic stress involves three symptom clusters: (1) symptoms of hyperarousal, (2) symptoms of intrusion, and (3) symptoms of constriction. This assessment looks at several symptoms in each cluster and then adds two additional areas of assessment – sense of shame and fragmentation.

All of these symptoms are not present in every experience of post-traumatic stress. Your goal in this material is to identify the experiences that accompany your experience of trauma, and to be able to verbalize them without a sense that “you’re doing something wrong” or are “exhibiting weakness” by having these experiences.

Symptoms of Hyperarousal: Trauma elicits fear and fear activates the flight-fight response. In post-traumatic stress the flight-fight response remains activated as a means for bracing against being surprised by another trauma. This results in all the changes one would expect if your adrenal system was perpetually left on high. One goal for re-establishing a sense of safety and learning how to intentionally relax (future section) is to be able to turn off this flight-fight response during times when it is not needed.

➤ Questions 1-5: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the hyperarousal response of **hypervigilance**. "Hyper" means elevated. "Vigilance" means watchfulness. Hypervigilance is an elevated sense of watchfulness and accounts for the generalized anxiety that often accompanies post-traumatic stress. After a trauma, it is normal to want to ensure you are not surprised by another crisis. But this watchfulness can begin to negatively impact your ability to rest – physically, mentally, or emotionally; and it can create a sense of suspicion that impacts how you interpret the people and events around you.

➤ Questions 6-10: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the hyperarousal response of **agitation**. Being "on guard" is one step away from being aggressive. When you live as if you are perpetually on the brink of a significant threat, it becomes natural to be more hostile or forceful to the undesirable aspects of your surroundings. When we are bracing for a threat, we are prone to interpret relatively small irritants or disappointments as being larger than they really are.

Symptoms of Intrusion: Memories are intrusive when they enter our mind against our will and do not leave our mind when we want them to. Most memories we can pick up and put down as we wish. Traumatic memories imprint in our brains in a manner that makes this process much more difficult (more on this in step three). Not being able to control our own thoughts can make us feel "crazy" and out of control. For this reason, for many people, intrusive symptoms are the most disturbing aspect of post-traumatic stress.

➤ Questions 11-15: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the intrusive response of **trigger responses**. Human memory is highly dependent upon associations. Seeing a familiar face "triggers" the memory of a name. Smelling a familiar ingredient "triggers" the memory of a meal. The more association an event has the more we remember it. Post-traumatic stress hijacks this basic human tendency to recall the trauma frequently. Hypervigilance results in an individual noticing more triggers in their environment and associating more things with the trauma "just to be sure" they are not surprised again.

➤ Questions 16-20: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the intrusive response of **flashbacks**. Flashbacks are past memories experienced as present realities. The senses (i.e., sight, smell, sound, sensation) are activated by the memory as if the memory was being relived. This is not something that an individual does intentionally, but is the by-product of how traumatic memories imprint in the brain. The stronger your experience of flashbacks the more important it is to do relaxation work while experiencing the memory to re-establish a sense of "chronological distance" from your memories.

➤ Questions 21-25: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the intrusive response of **sleep disturbances**. Our cognitive activity while we sleep may be one of the least understood aspects of common human experience. No one understands why we dream, much less what dreams mean or how to change our dreaming experience. What we do know is that it is common for those who have experienced trauma to have sleep disturbances: sleeplessness, restless sleep, and nightmares. We also know that these experience decrease, but are not always eliminated, as someone processes their trauma well.

Symptoms of Constriction: Intense experiences can make common experiences feel muted. Jumping on a trampoline makes jumping on the ground feel like you have concrete in your shoes. Attending a rock concert makes normal conversations feel like people are whispering. These parallel the way that the spike experience of trauma changes our experience of day-to-day events and emotions.

"As intrusive symptoms diminish, numbing or constrictive symptoms come to predominate. The traumatized person may no longer seem frightened or may resume the outward forms of her previous life. But the severing of events from their ordinary meanings and the distortion in the sense of reality persist. She may complain that she is just going through the motions of living, as if she were observing the events of daily life from a great distance (p. 48)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

➤ Questions 26-30: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the constriction response of **avoidance and isolation**. This is the most volitional of the post-traumatic responses in this assessment. When we don't feel safe it is natural to limit the number of things that can add to our feeling unsafe. If we do not believe we can handle what we're currently experiencing, we do not want to add anything to that experience. The natural, though unhealthy, response is often to withdraw and isolate.

➤ Questions 31-35: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the constriction response of **numbing**. Intense experiences make us less sensitive to less intense experiences. This creates a trap. We fear intense experiences, but we have a hard time experiencing things in the “normal range.” Some people respond by isolating (see above) to feel safe. Other people respond to this numbing by engaging in dangerous or painful activities to “at least feel something.” It is possible to re-acclimate to human experience in the normal range, but it requires exposing yourself to these events and relationship (steps seven to nine) after having healthily processed and disempowered the memory of the trauma (steps four to six).

“The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event (p. 1).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

➤ Questions 36-40: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the constriction response of **dissociation**. Dissociation can be hard to describe because it is to experience our own experiences in an atypical fashion (from without instead of within). A common experience is “dissociative dream,” those dreams where you watch yourself acting instead of experiencing the dream “from behind your own eyes.” Dissociation is an adaptive response God provided for times when people cannot physically escape pain. However, after trauma, this dissociative reflex can become activated at times when it is not warranted and become maladaptive.

“While numbness or dissociation at the time of the trauma can provide immediate emotional protection, over the long term it comes at a high price. One abuse expert wisely observes, ‘Dissociation does not take the abuse away, it takes the person away’ (p. 100).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

Other Post-Traumatic Responses: There are other common responses to trauma that do not fit the three symptom clusters above. In this assessment we examine two of them: shame and fragmentation.

➤ Questions 41-45: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the post-traumatic response of **shame**. Trauma leaves us with many of the experiences of shame: worthless, inferior, rejected, weak, humiliated, exposed, defiled, etc... Because of the frequency of memories related to trauma, these experiences of shame have a strong tendency to become part of our identity; instead of a passing emotional experience. It is important to understand this link between trauma and a shame-based identity in order to avoid a defeatist or reactive tendency that a shame-based identity brings.

➤ Questions 46-50: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions describes the post-traumatic response of **fragmentation**. Telling one’s own story well is difficult after a trauma. Discerning what to take responsibility for and what to blame on the trauma is hard. Explaining your reactions when you don’t want to (or it isn’t wise to) tell the story of your trauma to someone new. Wishing your life was different and allowing yourself to think-speak as if certain things were not true. All of these understandable challenges contribute to relating to others and understanding your own story in a way that is “fragmented” – the pieces are not connected to the accurate and cohesive whole.

Does alcohol, drug, steroid, or prescription medicine usage ever affect the frequency, intensity, or type of your post-traumatic stress; even for “self-medicating” purposes?

_____ Yes _____ No

These are mind-mood altering substances that both directly and indirectly exacerbate the experience of post-traumatic stress. If you have a substance abuse problem, then this struggle will have to be overcome before you will find consistent relief from PTSD. Regardless, consuming a depressant, stimulant, or other mind-mood altering substance while trying to gain emotional regulation is counter-productive and inadvisable.

Daily Symptom Chart

Remember to move through this material slowly. Do not over-saturate yourself with information that can serve as triggers for post-traumatic responses. Your goal should be to ensure that you’ve maintained a sense of safety and stability after each section of material (not just after each chapter to step) that you study.

To help you move slowly we have included a “daily symptom chart” (see next page). This is intended to do two things:

1. Initially, to help you become more familiar with the types of post-traumatic response you are experiencing.
2. Ongoing throughout your journey, to help you identify when symptoms are increasing and you need to take a break.

With time you will begin to use this tool to measure progress – a decrease in the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. For the time being, you are advised to be content using this tool to orient yourself to the experience of post-traumatic stress – gaining self-awareness of how your present reactions (i.e., thoughts and emotions) are tied to your past trauma. The greater your understanding of these connections the less “out of control” you will feel.

This tool can also be an effective way to communicate about the challenges you are facing with others. Having consistent language and being able to articulate the rise, fall, and triggers for each experience should decrease the awkwardness you feel in trying to describe what is commonly called “the invisible injury” (a name many war veterans give to their experience of PTSD).

In later steps in this material, the information you gather about the frequency, duration, intensity, and correlation with life events will be valuable in identifying goals to counter the impact of your suffering. In this sense, you are combatting PTSD in two ways with this tool:

1. Demystifying the experience of PTSD which should lessen the shame and secondary fear (that is the fear created by the misunderstood post-traumatic experiences), and
2. Equipping yourself with the information needed to strategically begin re-engaging with more of life and relationships when that becomes the wise next step in your recovery.

Key Questions about Disclosure

This will be a big step; probably the most challenging thing you’ve done since you decided to start this study. Give yourself the grace that this reality deserves. That grace should take the form of patience.

“True hope never minimizes a problem in order to make it more palatable and easily managed. For the Christian, hope begins by recognizing the utter hopelessness of our condition and the necessity of divine intervention, if we are to experience true joy (p. 105).” Dan Allender in *Wounded Heart*

Here are several things to keep in mind:

1. All your information is yours to do with as you please. Do not let the advisements of this study rob you of your voice in the process. If you’re not convinced this is a wise step for you at this time either seek greater clarification or wait.
2. Sooner is not always better; ready is better. A premature step forward can be a significant step backward. Make sure you’ve established a sense of safety before engaging this step.
3. Think about the post-disclosure timing. Is there anything coming up in the next few weeks (i.e., holidays, wedding, important business trip, etc...) that mean it would be better not to engage with disrupted emotions?

To whom is it beneficial for me to acknowledge what happened?

The biggest factor in selecting the person with whom you initially discuss your trauma is trust. As you talk about something that will generate many associations of feeling unsafe, being in the presence of someone that you trust is vital. You want the trust that you have for them to begin to transfer a sense of safety into the recollection rather than the memory projecting a sense of mistrust onto this individual. There are three types of trust that are important to consider.

1. **Personal Trust:** Are you comfortable in this person’s presence? Do you value their opinion? Can you share struggles and insecurities with them without feeling shame? These are the kind of factors that minimize the emotional magnifier of personal discomfort – you want the presence of this person to reduce your discomfort.
2. **Emotional Trust:** Do you have reason to believe this is someone who can handle the weight of hearing about your trauma? Do you feel like you would have to “tame” what you shared to protect this person from your story? These are the kind of factors that minimize the emotional magnifier of guilt – you do not want to feel like you are burdening this person beyond their emotional capacity.



Post-Traumatic Stress Daily Symptom Chart

Name: _____

Month: _____

Instructions: Track the intensity of your key post-traumatic symptoms using the scale on the right for each day of the month. On days with significantly more / less severe symptoms record key events or relational changes on the back of this page.

Example: None Mild Moderate Severe

3	3	3	3	Shade cells
2	2	2	2	
1	1	1	1	

Day of Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	
Hypervigilance	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Agitation	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Trigger Response:	3																															
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Trigger Response:	3																															
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Trigger Response:	3																															
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Flashbacks	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Nightmares or Sleep Disturbance	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Avoidance / Isolation	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Numbing	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Dissociation	3																															
	2																															
	1																															
Shame	3																															
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Fragmentation	3																															
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Other:	3																															
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“Combat veterans will not form a trusting relationship until they are convinced that the therapist can stand to hear the details of the war story. Rape survivors, hostages, political prisoners, battered women, and Holocaust survivors feel a similar mistrust of the therapist’s ability to listen (p. 138).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

3. **Experiential Trust:** Do you think this person would know how to respond if you started “getting lost in your upset” as you talked about your trauma? Do you think this person understands the experience of trauma well enough to help you process what you’re sharing? These are the kind of factors that minimize the emotional magnifier of uncertainty – you want this person to help reorient you if the process of remembering becomes overwhelming.

Who are the people in your life that best meet these criteria? _____

If you cannot identify someone who meets these criteria, then consider meeting with a professional counselor who has experience in the area of trauma.

In what level of detail do these acknowledgements need to occur?

There is not a “right answer” to this question. There is not a “percentage of the full story” that is optimally beneficial to disclose; as if there was a thermometer or measuring tape by which to determine optimal disclosure.

A better way to frame this question would be, “Am I moving towards not having what I disclose about my experience of trauma and post-traumatic stress determined by fear and shame?” If the answer to this question is “yes,” then you’re moving in a healthy direction. In this sense, you should be thinking about a trajectory; not a point on a scale.

The nature of a given relationship will determine how much is good to disclose.

- In a counseling-focused relationship, you would disclose more because you are working to assimilate all of the events of your life into a cohesive whole and not have certain parts (i.e., the traumas) that dominate or recast the other parts.
- In a relationship with someone as close as a spouse or best friend, disclosure would still be high as their care for you prevents you from believing this is something that you must keep hidden.
- In casual relationships, disclosure would be relatively low unless sharing parts of your traumatic history allowed you to care for this person in an important way or was needed to explain an uncommon reaction to something.
- In functional relationships (i.e., business or recreation), disclosure would likely not be warranted. This freedom reminds you that trauma is something you’ve experienced; not who you are.

Again, don’t feel like you have to do all of this now. We are describing a destination, not prescribing present reality. If at this point in your journey you take a wise step in the direction of what’s being described, then you are doing everything that is recommended at this point.

Here are other recommendations regarding how much to disclose when you are first talking to someone new about your experience of trauma or its influences in your life.

- Decide before hand how much you want to share and only share that much. This helps ensure that the moment of disclosure does not begin to feel “out of control” and, thereby, serve as a trigger event.
- Have a “thirty second version” of your story that you can share if a situation demands. These statements should acknowledge the reality without shame and without inviting further questions. Having these statements prepared prevents you from having to be creative in a moment when you already feel exposed.

Example after a Public Upset: “I’ve experienced some pretty difficult things that make it more difficult to gauge how to react to some challenges. I’m growing stronger and learning, but I’m sorry that I did not handle that as well as I would have liked.”

Example for an Awkward Direct Question: “Yes, I’ve been through some things that are harder than most people face. When its beneficial for myself or others, I’m open to talking about it, but I don’t believe now is one of those times.”

- Realize you can always share more, but you can’t share less. In a healthy relationship, it is always appropriate to say, “There is more to what I shared with you about...” This means that you should feel free to end a disclosure when you want and resume it later if you decide that is wise, needed, or beneficial.

When is it beneficial to begin this process; how do I know if I'm ready?

Not until you can embrace this step as something you believe will be beneficial for your recovery. You really do get to be in charge of your own recovery process. The trauma you experienced created enough disruption that you decided to start this study. You may have felt like you had little choice in that.

But it is good for you to study future steps and wait until you become convinced of their benefits before you take action on that step. This is not being "controlling" or fearful. It is exercise your voice and choice in the process of recovery. In trauma recovery, healthy is only healthy when you're ready.

Here are several indicators that you're ready to begin an initial disclosure with a highly trusted individual.

- It is clear to you who would be the best person with whom to have this conversation.
- You are taking this step because you believe it's best for you and not because you're being told you should.
- You've taken the available steps to establish a sense of safety in your life.
- You have decided how much you want to share at this initial disclosure.

When these criteria are met, beginning an initial disclosure is wise; that doesn't mean it will be pleasant. You may be relieved to have it over with or it may feel quite disruptive. But there is no pressure to share more until you have regained a sense of stability and safety after this initial disclosure.

What benefits can I expect from this step?

Secrets foster shame. Silence echoes pain. Lies unspoken cannot be refuted. Isolation keeps pain fresh.

Until we allow someone else into our world to speak truth on God's behalf, our trauma tends to have the last word on our lives. Disclosure is the crack in the door that allows light into darkness.

You may not experience all of these benefits at first. The initial experience of disclosure may be disorienting and frightening. But you can rest in the knowledge that this is the process you've set in motion and that, if you patiently continue this journey (taking breaks as needed), then shame can be removed, silence filled with care, lies refuted, and isolation replaced with a community.

Read Joel 2:18-27. What you have learned in this chapter may feel like a news report on all that "the locusts have eaten" (v. 25). Acknowledging the specific history and realness of your suffering can be a painful step. That should not be glossed over or understated. It is real. But take this passage as a promise from God to you. You can be made whole. Your emotions can be restored to health. You can learn what makes for healthy relationships and identify friendships that merit trust. You can be fully known and fully loved. Those things may seem far in light of what you've acknowledged in this chapter and your experience of remembering, but they are possible. Allow that to give you the hope necessary to continue on this journey.

Conclusion

Take a deep breath. If you feel overwhelmed, remember there is nothing true now that was not true before you read this chapter. You just know more about yourself and your struggle than you did before. This knowledge does not "add" anything to what is expected of you. You were going to battle with these emotions whether you knew them well or not. Now you can be better equipped for the struggle you were going to face anyway.

Encouragement Focus (ACKNOWLEDGE):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- What are the strongest symptoms of your post-traumatic experiences?
- What are you learning about the frequency and intensity of your various post-traumatic symptoms?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 3.

“What Are the ‘Invisible Injuries’ I’ve Suffered?”

UNDERSTAND the impact of my suffering.

“I fear facing the reality of my trauma and am tempted to try to live in denial, so I expected myself to live as if my trauma never happened [describe].

I can see how my trauma has affected me [describe].

It was wrong to interpret the impact of this trauma as my failing or my emotions as weakness.

God is more gracious than that and I must agree with Him.

The impact of my trauma is starting to make sense and help me see life differently [describe].”

Memorize: Isaiah 21:3-4 (ESV), “At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see. My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “At this” – Isaiah is responding to the vision of an attack that would have been as traumatic as any battle experience.
- “Body is racked” – Physically, Isaiah is affected with pain reactions that are as intense as anything he could imagine.
- “Staggered” – Cognitively, Isaiah is disoriented to the point that he is “bewildered” by what he sees.
- “My heart falters” – Emotionally, Isaiah is disturbed to the point that his hands and arms tremble in response.
- “Become a horror” – Narratively, Isaiah has come to the point that hope (twilight) no longer rejuvenates him.

Teaching Notes

“Any treatment approach that is not predicated on a basic comprehension of the nature of trauma in what it does to human beings will be ineffective and possibly harmful (p. 45)... Too often the survivor is seen by herself and others as ‘nuts,’ ‘crazy,’ or ‘weird,’ unless her responses are understood within the context of trauma (p. 68).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

“Abuse feels like an experience that has stamped you and has *the* final word on your identity. But the truth is God gives you a different identity... Your identity as God's child is far deeper than the abuse you suffered (p. 4).” David Powlison in *Recovering from Child Abuse*

“The most powerful determinant of psychological harm is the character of the traumatic event itself. Individual personality characteristics count for little in the face of overwhelming events. There is a simple, direct relationship between the severity of the trauma and its psychological impact, whether that impact is measured in terms of the number of people affected or the intensity and duration of harm (p. 57)... Trauma appears to amplify the common gender stereotypes: men with histories of childhood abuse are more likely to take out their aggressions on others, while women are more likely to be victimized by others or to injure themselves (p. 113).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“We must be very careful to avoid blaming abuse victims for their traumatic symptoms... Effects of trauma are not consciously chosen by the victim. Abuse victims do not choose to have amnesia, nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, or increased heart rates. At the same time, as adults, we all must come to the point of taking responsibility for our unhealthy patterns of behavior. Abuse victims often *do* choose to deaden themselves in response to their pain instead of turning to God for strength and healing (p. 104).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“A child is emotionally unable to refuse, modify, or detoxify a parent’s abusive projections. The power differential is too great and the projections too toxic and overwhelming. Furthermore, the child actually lives in the emotional world and fantasy life of the parent. This is the child’s reality (p. 322).” Richard T Frazier in “The Subtle Violations—Abuse and the Projection of Shame” in *Pastoral Psychology*

“The image of being without talent, mediocre, average, or worse is a self-serving, self-protective evaluation used for a purpose: it provides the victim with a contemptuous explanation for not being able to halt the pain (p. 116)... Many times the chronic patterns of lying or deceit, and to abused persons arise because of a forsaken history that forces them to concoct a past and a present that has no connection to their abused soul (p. 113).” Dan Allender in *Wounded Heart*

Embedded Study

Scars and casts, as painful as they are, come with advantages; they can be seen, they elicit sympathy, and they make our limitations understandable. Trauma does not afford us these luxuries. The impact of trauma is usually unseen, unknown, and therefore the limitations it creates are deemed “unacceptable.”

It is not just “them” who are guilty of these reactions. We, those who have experienced the trauma, often do not understand its impact because we cannot see its injuries; so we are often harder on ourselves than anyone else. We long to forget. We wish it was “just in the past” so we are more motivated than anyone else to respond in this way.

“Any treatment approach that is not predicated on a basic comprehension of the nature of trauma in what it does to human beings will be ineffective and possibly harmful (p. 45)... Too often the survivor is seen by herself and others as ‘nuts,’ ‘crazy,’ or ‘weird,’ unless her responses are understood within the context of trauma (p. 68).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

The goal of this chapter is simple – to help you understand the impact of trauma so that you feel less crazy.

Understanding the impact of your trauma is part of establishing a sense of safety – it is what allows you to feel safe in your own body and mind, even when your instinctual responses to life events are unpleasant. Understanding is what provides the sense of stability and insight necessary to begin to counter those impacts.

We will examine the impact of trauma in three sections:

1. Stages of Identity in Response to Trauma
2. Factors that Influence Impact
3. Types of Impact to Expect

Stages of Identity in Response to Trauma

What do I call myself now? After completing school, I called myself a “graduate.” After getting married, I called myself a “spouse.” After having a child, I called myself a “parent.” After experiencing a trauma, I call myself what?

Language, in these situations, is important because it carries an identity that comes with expectations. We will look at three types of identity that emerge after a trauma. They are meant to be sequential; which best fits you should change with time, but there is no time line for how long each identity statement is appropriate.

“Abuse feels like an experience that has stamped you and has *the* final word on your identity. But the truth is God gives you a different identity... Your identity as God's child is far deeper than the abuse you suffered (p. 4).” David Powlison in *Recovering from Child Abuse*

The three questions you should be asking yourself as you study this section are: (a) which of these best fit how I relate to my trauma now? (b) did I process the earlier stage of post-trauma identity well? and (c) what would it look like for me to grow into the next stage?

- I. **Victim** – This is a word that carries strong, negative connotations; because we often think of it as part of the phrase “playing the victim,” insinuating that someone is passively remaining in role of victim in order to get more of whatever sympathies or benefits accompany this role.

The fact that some people “play the victim” does not mean it is a defect in your character to be a victim. Victims of a crime should avail themselves to the counter-influences of justice. Victims of a heart-attack should abide by the recovery plan of their doctor.

A wholesome definition of being a victim is, “The recognition of when intense suffering has impaired your ability to engage life as fully as you did prior to the suffering event and willingness to allow others to play roles of care or justice until it is wise, healthy, or legally appropriate for you to do these things for yourself.”

For a time, it is appropriate to use the label “victim” to describe your relationship to your trauma.

- After an assault someone is the “victim of a crime” and should allow the legal system to seek justice.
 - After a severe injury someone is a “victim of that circumstance” and should be willing to receive additional care as they learn to live self-sufficiently again.
 - After being in a war zone someone is a “victim of what they’ve been exposed to” and it is good for them to allow others to help them process their reactions to those experiences.
2. **Survivor** – There is a time period between “needing additional help” and life assuming a “new normal.” The trauma still has a significant negative impact on your ability to function or emotionally respond to life as you would prefer. But you have established a level of safety and resilience that allows you to be more independent than you were in the victim phase.

Indicators that you’re entering the survivor phase of relating to your trauma would include:

- You understand the different kinds of impact that emerge from your trauma experience.
 - Your post-traumatic symptoms do not “seize” you in a way that impairs your life functioning.
 - You can be patient with yourself when experiencing post-traumatic symptoms.
 - You do not live bracing against the possibility of post-traumatic symptoms unless there are strong situational variables that make it wise to prepare for such experiences.
 - The sense of shame you feel when thinking of your trauma is significantly diminished.
 - You manage much less of your life to avoid post-traumatic symptoms than you did in the victim phase.
3. **Steward** – In this phase, memories of your traumatic experience are able to be managed well enough that they are “available” to help care for other people who are at earlier phases in their journey with trauma. In this phase, trauma has changed from a “weapon” used by Satan against you to a “tool” God can use to allow you to care for others.

II Corinthians 1:3-5 captures this phase of your journey with trauma, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.”

But do not try to rush yourself to this point. You will be best used by God as a steward of your trauma when you have walked your journey in the healthiest way possible. Be as patient with yourself as you would be with someone else with a comparable experience so that as you share your journey, it will be maximally beneficial for them.

Read I Timothy 1:15-17: In this passage, we see the benefits that can emerge with being able to trace the lineage of our identity in relation to the significant parts of our life. This passage looks at sin. In this study, we are studying suffering. Notice that Paul can trace his relationship to sin. He is still the “chief of sinners” (v. 15) but has come to know God’s perfect patience (v. 16) and ultimate victory (v. 17). Similarly, a healthy relationship to trauma will likely include: a recognition of ongoing impact, resting in God’s patience, and trust God’s in-process but assured victory.

Factors that Influence Impact

There is a danger in discussing the factors that contribute to the influence of a trauma. The danger is that we begin to do emotional math, “If my trauma only had 70% of the factors listed below then that means someone else’s trauma is 30% worse, so I shouldn’t complain.” The fallacy is that “could be worse” does not mean “not that bad.”

Do not use this material to silence yourself. Its purpose is to validate your experience and give you words to talk about why your trauma has impacted you the way that it has.

Another way to say this is, “Suffering is not a competitive sport.” Just because someone else got hit by a truck doesn’t mean your knee surgery hurts any less. God’s compassion is not in limited supply, so we do not have to “make our case” in order to get as much of it as we can. We do not have to “justify our need” in order to be heard.

Read Matthew 7:7-11. In light of the discussion above, ask yourself, "When I pray, am I envisioning a God who is this free with his compassion?" If the answer is "no," do not feel ashamed. It is common to doubt God after experiencing trauma. God is patient with that response as well. That is why he inspires so many psalms of lament and despair to be included in the Bible. As you consider the factors that influence the impact of trauma, remind yourself after each point (after each sentence, if necessary), God cares and he wants me to bring each of these factors to him (1 Peter 5:7). God is not annoyed or impatient. God does not expect me to "just get over it." God is patient like a good father should love his child after a tragedy (v. 11).

1. **Intensity of the Trauma You Experienced:** This is the first of three measures of the "size" of the trauma (intensity, duration, and frequency). The three factors constitute the most significant determinants of the trauma's impact.

"The most powerful determinant of psychological harm is the character of the traumatic event itself. Individual personality characteristics count for little in the face of overwhelming events. There is a simple, direct relationship between the severity of the trauma and its psychological impact, whether that impact is measured in terms of the number of people affected or the intensity and duration of harm (p. 57)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Factors related to intensity would include:

- level of personal pain (physical, mental, or emotional),
- exposure to violence,
- reasonable expectation of possible death,
- coercion towards making a decision that violates your conscience,
- being coerced to harm someone or something you love,
- having harm threatened against someone or something you love if you don't comply to a demand,
- other: _____

As the number or profundity of these factors increase in the trauma you experienced, the greater the intensity your trauma would have.

2. **Duration of the Trauma You Experienced:** The longer a trauma lasts, either duration or frequency, the greater impact it will have. As the trauma endures, the experience of that trauma changes from "the exception to an otherwise safe life" to "the normal experience of my life." The emerging sense of futility makes it easier to stop resisting the trauma. As we see in a later point, the resistance of trauma is a psychological buffer against the impact of that trauma.
3. **Frequency of Traumas You've Experienced:** As a trauma is repeated, we can easily adopt a sense of failure due to our inability to make it stop. Powerlessness is not only experienced in the moment of trauma, but also in the intervening moments when we reasonably expect the trauma to recur but are unable to prevent it. Later, after the traumas have ceased, it becomes harder to believe we could prevent a future trauma were the opportunity for it to arise. The result is that a sense of powerlessness and bracing seeps into our "peaceful moments."
4. **Age When You Experience the Trauma:** We can only face a trauma with the emotional and cognitive resources available at the time we face that trauma. For children, that means they must process a trauma with the maturity and life experience their tender years affords. Later milestones in maturation will be affected as the "life lessons" of this trauma are part of the young person's maturational foundation. This is not as deterministic as it sounds, but the effect should not be minimized and must be accounted for in order to be countered.

"A child is emotionally unable to refuse, modify, or detoxify a parent's abusive projections. The power differential is too great and the projections too toxic and overwhelming. Furthermore, the child actually lives in the emotional world and fantasy life of the parent. This is the child's reality (p. 322)." Richard T Frazier in "The Subtle Violations—Abuse and the Projection of Shame" in *Pastoral Psychology*

5. **Passivity in Your Response to the Trauma:** Resistance, even when it is futile, helps maintain a sense of personal autonomy and voice. When we emotionally surrender to an experience of trauma it feels like the trauma has stolen another facet of our personhood; the political captive who stops believing he'll be rescued, or the rape victim who stops resisting (this is not consent) her attacker. This is not to label anyone "weak" or "inferior" for reaching this point. But merely to identify a factor that accounts for an increase in the impact a trauma will have.
6. **Your Emotional Stability Prior to the Trauma:** Trauma is an experience that is "more than we are prepared to endure at the time we are required to endure it." If your general disposition is one that does not handle stress well or you were under intense stress prior to your experience of trauma, then the degree to which a trauma would have surpassed your ability to cope with it will be greater.

7. **Reactions from Loved Ones:** If, upon disclosing your experience of trauma, those that you trusted responded with disbelief, silence (i.e., acting as if nothing happened), minimization, misunderstanding, or blaming you for the experience, then this will increase the impact of your trauma. While this is generally true of all traumas, it is even more relevant for trauma related to various forms of abuse – physical, emotional, or sexual.
8. **Violation of Trust Associated with the Trauma:** This impact-factor includes two variations. First, if your trauma came at the hands of another person, then the more reasonable it was for you to trust this person (i.e., parent, teacher, pastor, etc...) the greater the impact will be. Second, drawing upon point #7 above, if your trauma is exacerbated by the negative response of a loved one, then the more trust that existed in the relationship in which you felt betrayed, the greater the impact will be.
9. **Broader Social Reaction to Your Experience:** It is not just the reaction of our “inner circle” of trusted people that contributes to the impact of a trauma. The broader social reaction does as well. Protesters against a war add to the post-traumatic experience of veterans. Pastors who speak about rape or prejudice without understanding increase the impact of these experiences. Social silence on issues that are public enough to warrant a public response also intensify the impact of trauma as it feels like “the whole world is complicit” in a cover up.
10. **Number of Post-Trauma Hardships Created:** There are many hardships that can result from a trauma: disability, job loss, loss of a loved one, emotional instability, and stigma just to name a few. These hardships serve as triggers for post-traumatic memories, add to the sense that the past keeps infringing upon the present, and feed a sense of powerlessness.
11. **Significant Events Associated with Your Trauma:** A house burning at Christmas time, learning of adultery on your anniversary, or a car accident in which your child dies at the intersection near your house would be significant events in close associate with your trauma. Not only do these serve as triggers, they add to the sense that you will not be able to escape the memory of the trauma (powerlessness again).
12. **Your Interpretation of the Trauma:** Do you believe this trauma means you’re cursed, forsaken by God, marked for life, broken beyond repair, deserving of these kind of things happening to you, or an indication of a powerful lesson God couldn’t teach you any other way? These types of beliefs are what we will wrestle with in steps four through six. People instinctually seek to make sense of our experience. Adults ask “Why?” as naturally as a baby cries. We think understanding will give us “closure” and allow us to “move past” the traumatic experience. While this is overly optimistic about the ground that can be gained through an accurate perspective on suffering, the better we make sense of our traumatic experience the better we will be equipped to counter the impact of our suffering – steps seven to nine.

As you examined these various contributors to the impact of a traumatic experience, what did you learn? _____

Types of Impact to Expect

While there are many similarities in the responses people have to trauma, no two responses are the same. In chapters two and three you are seeking to identify the “finger print” of your traumatic and post-traumatic experience. You should be taking comfort in the fact that you are not alone, while also realizing there are unique challenges in countering your post-traumatic experience. It can be difficult to keep these two realities in balance.

Read Proverbs 14:10 and I Corinthians 10:13. Our experience confirms that both of these passages are true and that the tension between them is real. We experience our sorrows in a way that no one else can fully enter our pain (Proverbs 14:10). Yet the challenges we face out of our experiences have been experienced and overcome by others. As you study additional ways that trauma may have impacted you, hold on to both of these truths. There is uniqueness to your experience that merits a very particular compassion and there have been enough people (including Christ – Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:14-16) to experience what you’re going through for you to have hope.

1. **Flashbacks:** Flashbacks, as the most intense of the intrusive symptoms, can easily make you feel “crazy.” It is as if your sense of time and five senses revolt on your mind. You no longer feel in control of your own life. Understanding how traumatic memories imprint differently from common, narrative memories can help offset this sense of being crazy. One way to contrast this difference is that narrative memories are retrieved as if we

were watching old movies of our life, while traumatic memories are retrieved as if we were living the past experience. In narrative memories we watch ourselves from a distance, while in traumatic memories we remember from behind our own eyes. This is a normal (meaning majority experience) for how traumatic experiences imprint differently from casual ones.

"Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative in context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images (p. 38)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

2. **Lens of Extremity:** When life has been threatened or, in some other way, all of your adaptive techniques have been proven utterly inadequate, then it becomes much harder to live a "normal day." Knowledge of the extreme circumstances of life are hard to unlearn or unknow. Usually when trauma hits, it strikes unexpectedly and unannounced into otherwise normal moments. So post-trauma, it can be harder to feel safe in "normal" moments again, because this is just the kind of moment trauma interrupted previously.

"Even after the victim has escaped, it is not possible simply to reconstitute relationships of this sort that existed prior to captivity. For all relationships are now viewed through the lens of extremity... No ordinary relationship offers the same degree of intensity as the pathological bond with the abuser (p. 92)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

3. **Loss of Voice:** Abusers threaten harm if you tell anyone. Shame says no one will like you if you tell anyone. Fear says that no one would believe you if you told. Despair says there is nothing anyone could do if you told them. You would rather just live as if the trauma never happened. Habits say if you start talking, then they will no longer be available to help you manage life as well as you are right now. There are so many voices competing to silence your voice and if they win then you are all alone with your pain.

"To fail to speak is awful. To speak is equally awful because the telling makes the story real (p. 34)." Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

"To live with chronic abuse is to live in silence, to be shut up. The voice of one so abused has been crushed. The victim is made inarticulate by intense fear... What is the point of speaking when no one will listen? She has shut up by the threat of abandonment, which will surely come if the truth is told. She lives in a world where voices lie, distort, and deceive. She can survive in such a world only if she learns how to lie, distort, and deceive. So she lies to herself and distorts the truth of her life in order to survive. She deceives herself and others, pretending she is really all right, when, in fact, she is dying inside. As the years go by, her voice is less and less a representation of her real self, until she finally reaches the place where she can no longer even hear herself (p. 77)." Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

4. **Doublethink:** Trauma happened. Life continued. Your world changed radically. The rest of the world didn't notice – teachers still gave tests, bosses still assigned projects, children still needed to be fed, laundry still needed to be washed, telemarketers still offered "great deals," etc... It is easy to live in two conflicting worlds, especially when the trauma you experienced was abuse as a child by an authority figure who should have been trustworthy. Children should be able to trust their parents or teachers. Parents and teachers define what it means to be "good" – they make the rules by which punishments and rewards are earned. If parents and teachers are bad, then the child is all alone in the world – a thought too scary for the child to consider. Yet the child instinctually knows abuse is bad. The result is that the child learns to live with two diametrically opposed thoughts (my parents are bad; my parents are good) somehow "reconciled" in their mind. This is what is called "double think."

"When it is impossible to avoid the reality of the abuse, the child must construct some system of meaning that justifies it. Inevitably the child concludes that her innate badness is the cause. The child ceases upon this explanation early and clings to it tenaciously, for it enables her to preserve a sense of meaning, hope, and power. If she is bad, that her parents are good. If she is bad, that she can try to be good. If, somehow, she has brought this fate upon herself, then somehow she has the power to change it (p. 103)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

"It is not unkind or ungodly to thoroughly assess the truth about one's own family. It is necessary for emotional and spiritual health (p. 148)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

5. **Ambivalence:** Weddings are a common place to experience ambivalence – two simultaneous but opposite emotions; it is common to simultaneously feel happy and sad, like laughing and like crying at a wedding. The experience of trauma multiplies the frequency with which we experience ambivalence. Quiet time alone is both desired for its respite and feared for its vulnerability. Meaningful conversation is both desired for its bonding capability and feared for its manipulative potential. Opportunity is both desired for its opportunity to bless and feared for its potential to implode.

"Many survivors have a deep fear of intimacy and commitment while they simultaneously longed for closeness. This ambivalence causes a push-pull effect that vacillates between idealizing and devaluing others (p. 89)." Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

6. **Stunted Emotional Growth:** This is particularly true for people who experience trauma in childhood, but has implications for those who experience trauma at any age. We emotionally mature as we (a) identify the appropriate emotional response to a situation – type and size, and (b) become more consistent-natural at giving that response in comparable future situations. Trauma disrupts "a" and "b." What is the appropriate response to trauma? Thinking about comparable future situations creates a fear response that magnifies future experiences in a way that makes our reaction disproportional.

"A funny thing about emotions, though, is that if you deaden yourself to one side, the other goes with it. If you want to feel joy, you will have to deal with grief. If you want to feel love, you will have to face fear. As you begin to feel and struggle with emotions long dead, hold on tightly to the fact that as surely as you pass through the painful ones, so you will eventually come out on the other side (p. 109)." Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

7. **Shattered Sense of Self:** "Who am I now? How has this experience(s) changed me? I feel like I responded to life one way BT (before trauma) and another way AT (after trauma), but I don't want this event to play that kind of seismic role in my life... but I also don't want to downplay its significance... but I also don't want to make excuses for future behavior. I'm confused and I wish I could think about my trauma and its implications less." Some version of this inner dialogue is very common for those who have experienced trauma.
8. **Reenactments:** What do you do when you've lost something? Retrace your steps. What do you do when a situation surprises you? Replay the events looking for what you missed. What makes a situation feel uncomfortable? When it is different from our most common or dominant experience or similar situations. How do we best learn new skills and information? Repetition. All of these dynamics are in play when it comes to the tendency to re-enact (physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, etc...) facets of a traumatic experience.

"There is a driven quality about these reenactments, as if the survivor is attempting repeatedly to find a way to master the unmasterable (p. 66)." Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

9. **Excessive or Dismissive towards Planning:** Planning can either become savior or unicorn to those who have experienced trauma. Some people respond as if their purpose in life is to account for every variable that could leave them vulnerable again. Their life and the life of those they love are believed (at least emotionally) to depend on their foresight and preparation. Other people take trauma as evidence that life will happen with its full force regardless of what we do. Planning is futile. They know what the word means, but find it practically useless (like the word unicorn). The best approach – because it's believed to be the only approach – is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in each moment with little thought to each decision's future implications, because life has proven itself untrustworthy.
10. **Deterioration of Problem Solving Skills:** The points above should make it clearer how the effects of trauma can deteriorate at one's problem solving skills. It is hard to emotionally-size experiences, which is necessary to discern how to respond to them. One has a love-hate relationship with trust, which is necessary for healthy relationships. The ability to anticipate a hopeful future is compromised, which is foundational to the hope necessary to carry out the solution to any difficult problem. Bottom line; life is harder and because few people know why (trauma is often kept secret) it feels like no one cares, so why keep trying? There is more hope than this paragraph indicates, but if it captures where you are, then that is where your journey begins – not just with hardship, but also with being understood.

"A great many coping mechanisms are destructive. The cycle is very similar to the abuse cycle. You feel; it hurts; you find some way to disconnect (p. 142)." Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

"In the mind of the survivor, even minor slights evoke past experiences of callous neglect, and minor hurts even though past experiences of deliberate cruelty. These distortions are not easily corrected by experience, since the survivor tends to lack the verbal and social skills for resolving conflict. Thus the survivor develops a pattern of

intense, unstable relationships, repeatedly and acting traumas of rescue, injustice, and betrayal (p. 111).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

11. **Self-Harm:** Self-harm rarely makes sense, even to the person who is doing it and finding relief in the pain. There are at least two dynamics that can account for the relief experienced through pain. First, the body responds to significant injury by releasing opiates; natural pain killers and an addictive drug-experience. Second, the experience of pain can trigger a dissociative experience (described in chapter two) which allows the individual to feel like they are getting outside the moment. In the traumatic moment both the release of opiates and dissociation are forms of God’s protection, but when we begin to manipulate these reactions outside times of actual trauma they change from provisions of God’s grace to means of self-destruction.
12. **Depression:** The influence of post-traumatic symptoms is emotionally exhausting. Questioning everything, struggling to trust anyone, not knowing when an intense emotional trigger may emerge taxes the body and mind. Even when these experiences are understood, they create emotional fatigue. Before they are understood, all of life can begin to feel futile.

“Protracted depression is the most common finding in virtually all clinical studies of chronically traumatized people... The paralysis of initiative of chronic trauma combines with the apathy and helplessness of depression. The disruption in attachment of chronic trauma reinforces the isolation of depression. The debased self-image of chronic trauma fuels the guilty ruminations of depression. And the loss of faith suffered in chronic trauma merges with the hopelessness of depression (p. 94).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

13. **Exaggeration of Gender Stereotypes:** Whether it is gender stereotypes or personality traits, trauma shows a tendency to embolden our natural tendencies. It would make sense that when we feel threatened we would rely on our natural strengths more and that our character weaknesses would be exposed as we engage day-to-day struggles with an intensity that assumes our survival was on the line.

“Trauma appears to amplify the common gender stereotypes: men with histories of childhood abuse are more likely to take out their aggressions on others, while women are more likely to be victimized by others or to injure themselves (p. 113).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Conclusion

What should you expect at this point on your journey? The answer is more likely insight than relief. Your post-traumatic symptoms may actually be more intense than they were before you began this study because of the amount of time and energy you have spent reflecting on your trauma and its impact.

But these reactions should make more sense to you and your sense of hope that they can be countered should also be growing. If that is not the case, then it is recommended that you begin meeting with someone who has more experience in walking with people after traumas in order to ensure that your journey has its desired outcome.

Use the time at the end of each step to make sure you are not moving too quickly through this material. It is easy to want to “go faster” to “get it done sooner.” That is a very understandable thought process. But remember to care for yourself well in the process of recovering. The ability to make choices about the pace of your recovery is a vital part of reclaiming your voice and sense of ability to make choices that matter about your life.

Encouragement Focus (UNDERSTAND):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- What did you learn in the section on the factors that influence the impact of a trauma?
- What did you learn in the section on the types of impact that are common after a trauma?
- Prepare: Are you caring for yourself in the six ways listed under “Care for Yourself Physically” in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 4.

"God Is Dead, Life Is Meaningless, or I Am Crazy"

LEARN MY SUFFERING STORY which I use to make sense of my experience.

"I formed beliefs [describe what] about myself, my life, and God based on my trauma.

I lived out of those beliefs [describe how] because they were all I knew and they 'fit.'

Those beliefs became the guiding themes of my life story.

Putting those beliefs into words scares me [describe why].

I reject that false narrative of my life and am committed to learning how my life fits into God's great story of redemption."

Memorize: Psalm 88:13-18 (ESV), "But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness." As you memorize this passage, reflect upon these key points:

- Psalm 88 – This is the darkest of all the psalms. God knew we would need words like this and he gives them to us.
- "Close to death" – The psalmist's experience was so intense he believed he might die.
- "Suffer your terrors" – The psalmist made sense of his experience by attributing it as being God's punishment.
- "I am helpless" – The psalmist was so overwhelmed that whatever strength or influence he had felt meaningless.
- "Surround me like a flood" – The experience was so encompassing that the psalmist felt like he was drowning in it.

Teaching Notes

"This side of heaven, no one can offer a fully satisfactory answer for why God continues to allow evil and suffering (p. 20)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

"One of the things that will be so important as you move through this book is trying to separate out your voice, the abuser's voice, and God's voice. Often times they will seem as if they all run together. Or yours gets completely squashed, and you can't tell the abuser's words from God's (p. 41)... Until you state what you know, you cannot find out what is a lie and what is the truth. And as long as the lies remain hidden, they will exert a powerful influence over your life (p. 72). .. If the prior knowledge is a lie, then all incoming information will get filtered through that lie, and the lie will stand. This is especially so if the lie was repeated many times and accompanied by high emotional intensity (p. 122)." Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

"Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation... They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis (p. 51)... Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, the sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living (p. 52)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

"The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, philosopher, and a jurist. The survivor is called upon to articulate the values and beliefs that she once held and that the trauma destroyed. She stands mute before the emptiness of evil, feeling the insufficiency of any known system of explanation (p. 178)... It appears, then, that the 'action of telling a story' in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory (p. 183)." Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

"The greater the wrong suffered, the more it gets ingrained into the identity of the person who endured it. Such a person sometimes comes to view himself – and others also come to view him – primarily as a sufferer of that particular role... It is as though the wrong suffered is the most defining event of his life – an event that prompts creative accomplishments, friendships, joyful events, whether old or new, and all else. When wrongdoing defines us, we take on 'distorted identities, frozen in time enclosed to growth' (p. 79)." Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

Embedded Study

This is not the step in which you will answer, “Why did this happen to me?” But that is the question that drives us to make sense out of the defining experiences of our life, of which traumas are typically included. From the time we begin to annoy our parents with the incessant question “Why?” people seek to make meaning of and find order in life.

Trauma crashes the narrative. Life no longer makes sense when something traumatic happens. If an event fit our existing narrative, it would have been “interesting,” “sad,” or “shocking” but not “traumatic.” By definition trauma, explodes our categories for living a life that seems to have coherence and direction.

“Trauma can shatter an entire worldview in less time than it takes for the trauma to occur (p. 161).” Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

In this chapter we will look at the unhealthy ways people commonly make sense of trauma. Do not feel guilty if the way you make sense of your trauma is false. An abused child should not feel guilty for believing their abuse happened because they were “a bad kid.” The story is false, but seeing its falseness should bring hope not shame. God invites you to be very honest.

“One bold message in the book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment—he can absorb them all... God can deal with every human response save one. He cannot abide the response I fall back on instinctively: an attempt to ignore him or treat him as though he does not exist. That response never once occurred to Job (p. 235).” Phillip Yancey in *Disappointment with God*

Don’t get locked down trying to put your confusion into words perfectly or capturing your beliefs just right. Your hope is not rooted in your ability to articulate your experience perfectly, but in the freedom that comes when you doubt these false narratives enough that God can begin to replace them with truth.

“There’s no single correct way to construct a person’s abuse story (p. 147).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

One final introductory remark, you should realize you will not reason or re-narrate yourself out of having post-traumatic symptoms. False narratives may enhance post-traumatic symptoms, but they do not cause them. Identifying (step 4), grieving (step 5), and replacing (step 6) these false narratives help to disempower the memories of trauma so that the strategies of reconnecting with life and relationships (steps 7 and 8) have an easier time taking root.

Trauma: A Frozen Story

To understand how a trauma created a story “frozen in time,” it can be helpful to understand how trauma moves from an experience to a narrative. That journey progresses from (a) facts / experience, to (b) emotions / reactions, and then takes on (c) meaning / significance.

1. **Facts / Experience:** This is what you began to sort through in step 2. Every story is filled with facts and events; people who do things, places where things happen, and things that are used for purposes. What happened? Who did it? How long did it take? These basic questions can become confused after a trauma because the experience is so surreal we wonder, “Did it really happen? Can this be true? Is this really possible?”
2. **Emotions / Reactions:** This is what you began to identify in step 3. Emotions are part of the experience, but they are more subjective than the facts of the experience itself. While facts and experiences remain the same, emotions and reactions change with time. Perhaps you were terrified at first, angry as reality set in, and now ashamed. The narrative you use to explain the traumatic experience would likely change as these reactions changed.
3. **Meaning / Significance:** Now in steps 4-6 you will articulate, grieve, and replace the way you understand your trauma. Who you see as guilty-innocent, active-passive, aware-ignorant, complicit-irrelevant, etc... changes the nature of each character and relationship in your story? What you believe is safe, possible, or warranted *now* is part of your story. How the experiences impact your future aspirations, how you answer the “why?” question, and how you believe other people should respond now is part of the story.

Whatever we come to believe at the level of meaning-significance becomes the background music of our lives. We perceive each moment or respond to each moment as if it adheres to the tone of this music. It becomes the assumed explanation, tone, or outcome for day-to-day experiences.

“One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as a ‘pre-narrative.’ It does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller’s feelings or interpretations of events (p. 175).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

"Life goes on, and so does much growth, but the trauma itself and the lessons derived from that trauma are sealed away, unaffected by new experience in information. I often tell survivors that it is as if part of their thinking got frozen in time (p. 133)." Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

The result is that we get older and wiser. We gain new experiences, skills, and relationships. But when something resonates with our trauma experience, we have a strong tendency to allow our suffering story, the meaning we placed on our suffering, to explain, define, or consume that present moment. Whether it is as intense as a visual-auditory flashback or as subtle as a misplaced heightened sense of alarm, we revert back to the suffering story as our grand narrative.

Themes Used to Make Sense of Trauma

Below we will examine 10 narrative themes that are commonly used to make sense of trauma. This list is not exhaustive, but representative and meant to help you put yourself into words. These themes are divided into four sections: themes related to God, self, other people, and life in general.

As you read them, realize these themes likely began as feelings (i.e., instinctual emotional responses) that became cemented as beliefs (i.e., guiding principles that transcend a given moment and are used to make sense of the rest of life). You didn't set out to embrace these themes. They just made sense in light of your experience and became the "safe" way to think; even if these beliefs resulted in deterioration in other areas of life.

After each theme a Bible passage and devotional reflection is provided. These are not meant to be holistic rebuttals to these themes; rather they are meant to provide a crack in that theme through which doubt can begin to make room for truth. God knows these are beliefs you clung to for survival, and he wants to replace in a way that cares for you well in the process.

God-Themes

Give yourself the freedom to articulate these themes. Putting them into words is not wrong or irreverent. They already exist. Putting them into words allow us to consider whether they are accurate and whether we want to accept them as the guiding themes of our life. The fear that you cannot be honest with God about what you actually believe about him would only cement the idea that he is who you are afraid he might be.

1. **God is not good.** "If God created a world, that in some way bears his image, and I could experience a trauma this bad, then a trauma like this must reflect God's character in some way. Saying bad-God may feel like saying dry-water or cold-fire, but it represents my experience even if it doesn't make sense."

Often unhealthy ideas can follow good logic. That is the case above. But when we give way to the idea that God is not good, then there becomes no basis for the expectation of peace, hope, or stability. The world becomes governed by a "survival of the fittest" principle in which everyone is either predator or prey; even in a social herd (the closest thing to safety) you want to make sure you're not the weakest-slowest because that simply means "first eaten."

At this point, it is enough to realize that the fact that we experience trauma as an intense exception to the normal experience of life means that it is not indicative of God's character. You can hear a note out of place in a song only when the rest of the song is played well.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if "God is not good"? _____

Read Psalm 34. Begin by realizing that God includes phrases like "the Lord is good!" (v. 8a) in Scripture because he knew we would need to be reminded of this. The fact that the Bible speaks to our doubts is a sign of compassion, not condemnation. Then begin to notice the phrases that reveal the context of this reminder about God's goodness. It involved those who needed refuge (v. 8b), were afraid (v. 4) and in need (v. 5). God reassures us that he hears our prayers (v. 17) and that our affliction is not a sign we've sinned or that he has rejected us (v. 19).

2. **God does not care.** "Maybe God is good, but he's just not concerned enough. After all, there are plenty of people with a 'strong moral fiber' who are unmoved about important issues going on around them. Perhaps that explains what is going on with God. I can understand, if with all he's got on his plate, God happened to overlook my life."

It is easy to fall into the trap of viewing God as the "CEO of All Creation, Inc. LLC" rather than our loving heavenly Father after an experience of trauma. It eases the internal disruption by depersonalizing God. If God were a system of

beliefs, a machine, or even an accountant, then our questions about his seeming lack of involvement or concern would be less intense.

But the implication of this mindset is that we would neither pray nor read our Bible. Prayer would just remind us that God is not listening and reading our Bible would result in the hollow echoes of promises we believe to be false. This false theme transforms two of our primary sources of strength into reminders of our worst fears.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if “God does not care”? _____

Read John 11:1-44. Don’t just read that “Jesus wept” (v. 35); notice why he wept. This passage is powerful not merely because it reveals that Jesus, as our great high priest (Hebrews 2:14-18 and 4:14-116), has the capacity for tender emotions, but it shows that God is moved by our hardships. Notice that Jesus was moved multiple times (v. 38) even when he was about to intervene in this situation within a matter of minutes (v. 43-44). Even when God is about to make our situation better he does not withhold his compassion from us during whatever interval exists before he does so.

- 3. God is not able to help.** “Well, if God is good and he cares, maybe he’s just not able. This is where we get caught up in that ‘if people are really free to make choices..., then we are going to get hurt’ argument, right? That makes sense, it is just not very satisfying and doesn’t offer much hope.”

We will not get around the obstacles related to people who make real choices and their ability to inflict intense suffering in the lives of others. But this reality does not have to be embraced with a sigh of resignation that makes us feel powerless in light of our trauma (one of the most destructive impacts of suffering).

If people are free to make choices that matter, then we also are free to make choices that matter. It is not just “them” (i.e., those who inflict trauma) but also “us” (i.e., those who have experienced trauma) who make choices of consequence. God is active in both – calling traumatizers to repentance and seeking to mitigate their influence; and caring for the traumatized and empowering their ability to stand against trauma, both personally and systemically.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if “God is not able to help”? _____

Read Numbers 11:16-35. Before you read this passage keep one finger on this page and pinch it together with the pages that start with Exodus chapter one. That is the account of the life of Moses to whom God said, “Is the Lord’s hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not” (v. 23). Moses had a life long history of trauma and provision in his walk with God. We can understand his doubt. Too often we read our Bible as if the people of God lived a “series of epic moments” instead of “a long lifetime” like we do. When we correct this perspective we will be better able to personalize God’s promises and relate to heroes of the faith, like Moses, who struggled to believe, like we often do. The result is our faith will become much more real and personal.

Me-Themes

If we don’t create an unhealthy life story by changing God, the next easiest place to go is blaming or shaming ourselves. While this may sound odd – why would the victim blame the victim – it is surprisingly common. False beliefs about ourselves after trauma are usually rooted in a desire for more control over our lives than we actually have; if it was our fault, then we would have more capacity to protect ourselves in the future. After a trauma we often desire control so badly that we’ll sacrifice whatever narrative-coherence or personal-dignity is necessary in order to get it.

- 4. I deserve this.** “As a sinner, I deserve Hell. While my trauma was intense, it is still less than I deserve. Who am I to complain that God would allow me to experience trauma if he saved me from Hell?” This is the high-theology version of self-blame.

We do not have to be “ultimately innocent” in order to be “innocent of deserving a trauma.” Weighing Hell against trauma is to conflate these two concepts. God does not allow our eternal damnation to excuse temporal suffering. If this were the case, there would not be so many biblical commands against injustice.

The non-theological version merely looks for things you did wrong before or in response to the trauma and relies on these as explanations for the trauma. The child who back-talked before they were beaten and says, “I was a brat.” The adult who began having panic attacks after their house burned and thinks, “Maybe I made an idol of my possessions.”

It is common for people to confuse correlation (i.e., two events happening in close proximity) with causation (i.e., one event creating or excusing the other). Whenever suffering occurs we will have sinned before and will sin after. Even if our actions create the context for trauma (i.e., getting intoxicated and going home with a stranger), they do not mean the resulting trauma (i.e., rape) is our fault. The call to be wiser is not the same as bearing responsibility.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if “I deserve this”? _____

Read Job 1-2. As you read, make a two column list. In the first column record every form of suffering Job experienced. In the second column write out how you would have found a way to condemn yourself for this. What should you have prepared for? What would you have assumed had become too important to you? What lesson would you have thought God was trying to teach you? After making these two lists, go back and read Job 1:1. What is scary and what is comforting about this realization?

- 5. **I am marred.** Not all scars are sources of shame. But when an injury (speaking more of emotional than physical) becomes a source of shame, we feel “marred” (i.e., diminished in a way that should be obvious to everyone). This is another common way to make sense of trauma.

When this happens our trauma becomes the explanation, directly or indirectly, for every bad things that happens to us. Each subsequent experience of rejection, failure, omission, oversight, or setback is believe to be caused by or significantly contributed to by our trauma. This is another way trauma creates a sense of powerlessness.

This does not mean trauma doesn’t have influence. Step 3 was all about trauma’s influence. But as we learn of trauma’s influence we must be careful not to allow it to be the assumed cause of every negative experience. This would make us either passive towards or blind to the things we can change in our lives.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if “I am marred”? _____

Read Luke 8:40-56. Begin by noticing three things. First, the woman who was sick was suffering. Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well” (v. 48) not, “Your sins are forgiven.” Second, cleanness went from Jesus to the lady instead of uncleanness from the lady to Jesus; the typical progression. Jesus’ wholeness was more contagious than her sickness and he was happy to share it. Third, Jesus wanted her to feel accepted not just restored. Look at the first word he used to address her, “Daughter” (v. 48). She felt like she was such an outcast she would need to sneak up and steal a miracle. Jesus wanted her to know that his love defined her much more than her suffering ever could.

- 6. **I am crazy.** Perhaps you do not morally condemn yourself, you just doubt the soundness of your mental faculties as the barrage of post-traumatic symptoms (intrusive, constrictive, and hyper vigilant symptoms) assault you. You view yourself as now officially belonging to the group of “those people” who are the butt of counseling-related jokes.

Hopefully these experiences make more sense to you now than they did when you began this study. It is often easier to give ourselves more grace after a physical injury (i.e., breaking a leg or heart surgery) than after the “invisible injury” of post-traumatic stress. It is easier to convince ourselves we are not handicapped, or that we are not of less value as a person if we are handicapped, during physical therapy than in the recovery from a trauma.

Be very careful not to describe your experience of post-traumatic symptoms in pejorative language. Don’t say things like, “I’m not the same person I was before the crazy hit,” or, “before my mind cracked.” These ways of describing your experience of trauma wraps them in a narrative that unhealthily and inaccurately questions your mental status.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if “I am crazy”? _____

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. It is right to acknowledge our fragility. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually we are “jars of clay” (v. 7). There is a healthy humility that comes with acknowledging this. Healthy humility allows us to acknowledge our weaknesses, challenges, and limitations without being shamed by them. This is an important area of character you’ll need to monitor on your journey – can you articulate your weaknesses in relevant moments and allow others to care for you without demeaning yourself?

Others-Theme

After a trauma, especially those involving relational betrayal or neglect, it can be very difficult to discern the difference between "safe pain" and "unsafe pain." This makes it very easy to generalize other people as "unsafe." Often when this happens the traumatized individual goes through cycles of isolation and blind trust that are painful on both sides of the experience; confirming the belief that relationships are too dangerous to be worth the risk.

7. **All people are unsafe.** People have a lot in common: they have good intentions they do not always follow through upon, they are selfish and have a tendency to consider their own interest first, they are busy and have trouble remembering the things are important to others, etc... These things are true even of "good people" (i.e., those it would be reasonable to trust).

When you have had experiences with "bad people" (i.e., those it is unwise to trust) and these experiences have had a traumatic impact on your life, these similarities between "good people" and "bad people" are more than odd; they feel unacceptably risky. This theme becomes even more pronounced, as we examined in step 3, when those who broke your trust were in a position that should have been safe to assume was trustworthy (i.e., parent, teacher, etc...)

Begin doubting this theme by realizing two things. First, it is reasonable for your sense of suspicion to be heightened. You should not be judged for that. Do not retreat from feared rejection into self-imposed isolation. Second, the cycles of isolation and blind trust (reacting to the loneliness of isolation with accelerated, over disclosure or over dependence when you do trust someone) is unsustainable. Even if parts of this theme are very reasonable, it is unhealthy and reinforces a dynamic that increases your pain.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if "All people are unsafe"? _____

Read James 5. This is an odd passage in light of the discussion above. But notice that God is acknowledging two things in these verses. First, God is affirming that there are "unsafe people" who are to be condemned and avoided because of their abuse of others (v. 1-6). Second, God is affirming that those who have been hurt by "unsafe people" still need community (v. 7-20). James knew the suffering described in verses 1-6 could easily have caused these believers to turn on another – being impatient (v. 7), grumbling (v. 9), not supporting one another in hard times (v. 14), not being vulnerable in areas of needed growth (v. 16), and not pursuing one another (v. 19-20).

Life-Themes

As we search for a way to make sense of the inexplicable, the lack of a satisfying explanation for trauma leads us to ask very large, philosophical questions. We begin to wrestle with questions that have perplexed great minds for centuries, but we ask these questions not as students, but as survivors. This level of personalization adds to the intensity with which we rely on the conclusions that are typically engaged from the safe distance of the "ivory towers" of higher learning.

8. **Life is meaningless.** "Maybe the problem is that I'm looking for order in something that is random; like trying to find the rhythm in the static of a radio that can't find a station. Maybe I am frustrated because what I am desperately seeking what does not exist. That would make sense of why I've never tried so hard at anything, as I've tried at finding meaning for my suffering, and failed."

This theme is very tempting and, initially, relieving. There is rest to be found when we can stop searching. But it's the backside of this theme that becomes destructive. If life has no meaning to explain evil, then it has no meaning to pursue virtue or purpose. Relief comes at the cost of motivation. It is hard to get excited about a life that "just is."

It is healthy to come to the place of accepting, "I may not understand why this happened," but dangerous to assume, "There is nothing to be understood." Trauma happened. It mattered. It reveals the moral fiber of our world and vulnerable significance of people. Your experience was part of that larger story in a way that cannot be considered meaningless if God's will is ever "to be done on earth as it is in heaven."

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if "Life is meaningless"? _____

Read Matthew 6:7-13. Read this not just as a model prayer but as the mindset of prayer. Focus particularly on the phrase from verse 10 referenced above, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Notice several implications of this prayer. It acknowledges our world is broken in ways that are at odds with God's will. The continuous tense verbs, implying believers will need to pray like this until we reach heaven, means many of our "why" questions will not have satisfying answers now. The fact that this model prayer is given to the church-at-large means we are not alone in this experience. The phrase "as it is in heaven" means we will come to a place where the sense of meaning that has been disrupted in this broken world will be (already is) made right in heaven.

9. **Life is haunted.** "Life can have meaning and still not be safe. Maybe it's not as futile as I just implied, but the number of things that can trigger post-traumatic symptoms can make life feel like it's filled with ghosts who delight in making me miserable."

Even if only partially accurate, articulating these themes should be helping you put your experience into words. "Haunted" can be a good descriptor of the post-traumatic experience in the same way "down" can be a good descriptor of depression; as long as neither exorcism nor altitude is deemed the solution.

The problem with the haunted-theme is that it provides a sense that your struggle is with supernatural causes outside your control (even if you're not referring to literal ghosts) instead of natural-common responses to intense hardship and the things that remind us of them. When we think of life as haunted it is much harder to see how we can influence the things that are disrupting our life.

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if "Life is haunted"? _____

Read I Peter 5:8-11. We often read this as a sin-temptation passage. But it should also be understood as a suffering passage. Satan does not care whether our life is destroyed by sin or suffering. He will do whichever is most effective. In this sense, you do have an adversary seeking your demise through your suffering. But there is more hope than the haunted-theme would imply (v. 10) and, when this dynamic is in play, our role in the battle is simply to resist Satan's strategy (v. 9); which you can read as understanding his tactics (steps 2-4) while countering their effects (steps 5-7).

10. **Evil wins.** "I give up. Whatever God has done, is doing, or will do, I don't care. I can't take it anymore. God may win in some cosmic sense, but I am conquered. Even in many books with happy endings there are characters who die in the early chapters and never get to see 'the good times.' I guess that is me."

As a point-in-time statement about the level of hope you feel, there is nothing wrong with this statement. It may provide relief to say it out loud and have someone understand the level of pain and darkness you feel. As a final-statement of your appraisal of your life, this is obviously (even to you) a destructive life theme.

When this theme seems to press in on you, reframe it this way, "Evil is winning, but it will not win in the end. I am behind in a way that feels absolutely hopeless, but I also know the final score. I do not know how things will get from here to there, but I also know I am not responsible for the turnaround. I will reach out to others who care for me and lean on their faith until I begin to see the hope that I know exists but cannot feel."

How has your post-traumatic experience led you to live as if "Evil wins"? _____

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 and 4:8-10. Notice that Paul was as honest as you have been. Faith did not silence his despair. Faith is what allowed him to give voice to his despair. Being able and willing to give voice to his despair is a large part of what prevented Paul from drowning in his despair. God does not reject you because your experience overwhelms you. Notice that even though Paul's hope was set on God (1:10) he emphasized the essential role of prayer and encouragement from others (1:11). The more this theme becomes large in your story, the more important it will be to involve other people in your life.

These are not the only ten destructive themes of suffering that can be used to make sense of your post-traumatic experience. Hopefully, they are representative of the kinds of thinking that make suffering the unrelenting main theme of your life story.

More than this, it is hoped that this section gives you a pattern (1) to articulate the destructive messages of your suffering, (2) to honestly acknowledge the pain, and (3) to counter them with Scripture even before you see (4) how they are replaced with the gospel (chapter six).

Articulate: What other destructive themes do you use to make sense of your post-traumatic experience?

Acknowledge: How do these messages contribute to or intensify the pain that you feel?

Counter: How does Scripture counter the core beliefs or perspective of your suffering story? Which passages?

Replace: Knowing truth is different from having that truth become the dominant theme of your life. You may be discouraged as you’ve read counters to your suffering story, which haven’t yet seemed to counter your post-traumatic experience. Begin now by praying a simple honest prayer to God about where you are. Use the simply, desperate prayer of the father who feared for life of his child as an outline, “I believe; help my unbelief (Mark 9:24)!”

From Facts to Themes to Story

How do we develop an experience or set of experiences into a story? The answer to this question will be unique to each person. While we may all interpret painful life experiences with similar themes or combination of themes, the way we move from events to story is not uniform.

Rather than proposing a model of story development that seeks to capture the thought process of every person, it would be better to provide a guided, inductive tour of how you have moved from experience to story. Start by reflecting on what you have learned to this point in the process.

- How you have already begun to make sense of your life with the ten themes above or ones you added to the list?
- Which of the themes do you naturally gravitate towards?
- Is this gravitation new (only beginning with your post-traumatic experience) or a long standing tendency?
- How have these themes distorted your interpretation of *new life events* not directly related to your trauma?
- How have these themes distorted your interpretation of *past events* not directly related to your traumatic?
- How have these themes distorted your anticipation of *future life events*?
- What phrases or thoughts capture your preferred theme(s)? How often do you say them to yourself or others?
- Who or what has become more and less trusted or enjoyable as your post-traumatic experience has endured?

As you reflect on these questions, it should help you see how you are moving from facts to story. If you do not like what you discover, do not be alarmed. The fact that you can see the destructive themes as “not good,” means that the destructive themes do not have the place of dominance in your heart and mind

Encouragement Focus (SUFFERING STORY):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- Which of the 10 suffering story themes best capture the way you give meaning to your trauma?
- When and how are these themes most repeated or strongest in the way you think?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 5. “I Will Trust God with My Tears”

MOURN the wrongness of what happened and receive God’s comfort.

**“I am willing to agree with God emotionally about my suffering.
I can see that God does not just want me to ‘get over this’
but to ‘love me through my loss and pain.’ [describe difference]
I will accept that ‘blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matt 5:4)’
as expressed by God’s loving me personally through this group.
Mourning my suffering with God and this group has changed me [describe].”**

Memorize: Zephaniah 3:18-19 (ESV), “I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame, and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “I will” – God is voluntarily involved. You do not have to beg. God is more eager to help than you are desperate.
- “You who mourn” – God has a special compassion for those who are mourning (Psalm 56:8).
- “Suffer reproach” – God understands that your grief comes with all the challenges and stigma we’ve discussed.
- “Deal with all your oppressors” – You can trust God with whoever was involved in your trauma: actively or complicit.
- “Lame... outcast... shame” – God knows your experience: feeling powerless, rejected, and embarrassed.

Teaching Notes

“One of the surest signs an abuse survivor is healing and coming alive is that, after staring straight into the ugly vortex of his or her past trauma and pain, he or she can mourn the losses and yet look toward the future with hope (p. 154)... Morning loss is an honest response to what has actually happened, and it’s also necessary for thorough healing (p. 154).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“Too often ‘prayer’ is indistinguishable from thought life. ‘God’ becomes blended with chaotic mental processes, rather than existing as a distinct person (p. 24).” David Powlison in *“Why Me?” Comfort for the Victimized*

“A godly response in the face of abuse is to grieve—for the perpetrator’s sin and for the damage done to our soul; but the natural response is to cower in shame, condemning our own soul for being so foolish as to hope, want, or risk (p. 65).” Dan Allender in *Wounded Heart*

“She lost the opportunity to be a child, the knowledge that her parents loved her no matter what, a sense of safety in her own body, a sense of competence, a sense of moral integrity. All of these losses need to be grieved (p. 164)... Hope is a new thing for the survivor. What little has grown up with in her during the course of therapy is usually not strong enough to carry the weight of grief (p. 166).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

“The survivor needs help from others to mourn her losses. All of the classic writings ultimately recognized the necessity of morning and reconstruction in the resolution of traumatic life events. Failure to complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the traumatic reaction (p. 69).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“The telling of the trauma story thus inevitably plunges the survivor into profound grief. Since so many of the losses are invisible or unrecognized, the customary rituals of morning provide little consolation. The dissent into morning is at once the most necessary in the most dreaded task of this stage of recovery (p. 188).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Embedded Study

What are you supposed to do with the heaviness of step four? Those narratives are very “sticky” or wouldn’t be able to create the level of disruption that they do. They are also plausible; if they didn’t make so much sense in light of a trauma, then we would just shake them off and move on with our lives.

The fifth step may not seem intuitive at first, but once you think about it, it should seem very logical. You need to take time to mourn the trauma you experienced and its impact. Now that you’ve begun the process of removing the destructive suffering messages, you can grieve the experience without the emotional contaminants that are so tempting (i.e., blaming yourself, being angry at God, isolating from safe people, or generally be cynical about life).

Until we remove the destructive narratives that attached to our suffering from our experience of trauma our, sadness is perpetually interrupted by arguing against the things we fear our trauma means. We get stuck trying to solve theological riddles about God or reasoning ourselves into trusting again.

“This is exactly why Lamentations was inspired by God as sacred Scripture—it teaches us how to mourn overwhelming losses and yet find hope in God (p. 155).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

Grief is a process by which we embrace the fact that God agrees with our sorrows. We don’t have to convince anyone of anything. We can be weak, sad, and cared for like we longed to but didn’t feel safe to ask for. The counter narrative that the gospel provides for our experience of trauma only makes sense from a context of safety; otherwise we are only frantically arguing with fear, which is like trying to put out a grease fire with water (makes sense, but doesn’t work).

To help you understand what it means to grieve your experience of trauma and the impact it has had, we will consider the subject of mourning in three sections.

1. What Is Being Mourned?
2. Mourning’s Traumatic Twin: Fixation
3. How to Mourn

What Is Being Mourned?

Most of the losses that come with trauma are not tangible. Rarely do we have scars or missing limbs that would provide evidence to others of the trauma we faced. It can be argued both ways whether these physical marks would make the experience of trauma easier or harder. Either way, the majority of losses related to trauma do not have indicators which can be seen.

This makes it easier to believe, “I should just get over it. If there’s nothing to show, then there’s nothing to complain about.” If this were true, then you would not have studied this far into the material. Below we will examine ten losses commonly associated with trauma.

Don’t use these items as a check-list, but as a prompt to make vague things clear. You may identify your “top 3 losses” or you may find a way to better articulate your losses which are not precisely captured in the list below. Either way, if you are able to put into words the losses you’ve experienced, then this list will have served you well.

1. **Loss of a Sense of Safety:** Trauma makes it harder to trust the world around you. When calm means “the threat is hidden” instead of “all is well,” your relationship with the world around has fundamentally changed. The impact of this loss can be mitigated with time, but for as long as the disposition of feeling unsafe persists; this is a loss to be grieved.

An often overlooked aspect of this loss is its effect on our sense of humor. When the world is not safe, it is “no time for laughter” or laughter becomes a veil behind which we try to hide how uncomfortable we are. Either way, the pure and free ability to laugh and enjoy the ironies of life is, at least temporarily, lost.

2. **Loss of a Sense of Competence:** When is my mind going to be high jacked by the past next? What will I be doing, that is important enough to warrant my full attention, but gets lost in a memory or a wave of emotions? Can I trust myself to engage the things that are important to me and those I love while my mind is so easily diverted? Will I ever be able to trust my own mind again?

These questions easily reveal the loss of confidence that can occur with post-traumatic symptoms. The resulting insecurity is an experience to be grieved. Again, focus and confidence can be regained, but for as long as they are absent, mourning is an initial appropriate response.

3. **Loss of Trust:** The loss of a sense of safety takes on an interpersonal dynamic when it begins to impact relationships; generalized uncertainty begins to be experienced as mistrust. Your ability to enjoy relationships and others ability to enjoy relationship with you is disrupted when trust is strained without cause... at least without cause that emerged from an offense in that relationship.

The result is strained or superficial relationships that result in a sense of loneliness. The first step towards resolving this dynamic is grieving. Allowing yourself to admit and feel sad about this loss is the type of vulnerability that will need to be expressed in the relationships you long to have. Grieving is part of healing.

4. **Loss of Emotional Regulation:** How important is this event? This is the baseline question of emotional regulation that is impaired by the experience of trauma. Intrusive and constrictive symptoms of post-traumatic stress combine to make it exceedingly difficult to discern how significant a moment is and, thereby, how you should respond to it.

The inability to trust one's emotions is an experience to be grieved and part of the healing process. Even if you do not know what response a situation warrants, you know what response your confusion warrants – grief. This can serve as a baseline from which to begin establishing greater emotional regulation and inviting people into your journey.

5. **Loss of Sense of Proportionality:** Accurate comparison is a life skill that we don't appreciate until it becomes difficult. As we've already mentioned, our sense of humor and conflict resolution skills are strongly rooted in our ability to discern the appropriate size of things: in conflict, “over-reactions” assume proportional reactions and, in humor, dry humor assumes the listener can pick upon the difference between a “normal” response.

Imagine shopping and seeing a sign that says “50% Off” but not finding any original price. This is a depiction of the post-traumatic experience. You know you should feel “less” or “more” at any given moment, but all of the factors above impair your capacity to know what that means. In those moments, your emotional options are anger, fear, passivity, or grief. Grief is the healthiest.

6. **Loss of Identity:** Who am I *now*? Like it or not, trauma usually becomes a before-after moment in our lives. We locate events by identifying whether they happened before or after our experience of trauma. When an event takes on this magnitude, it becomes part of our identity.

This does not mean you are a “new person” but it does mean you're not “the same person” you were (which is true as a result of dozens of experiences across our life). Because the experience of trauma is so profoundly negative, it is appropriate to mourn these changes in identity, even if God promises to use them redemptively. Often we silence our grief by believing that sorrow over past events dishonors what God has done to provide salvation or promises to do in the future.

7. **Loss of Innocence:** It would be nice not to automatically assume the worst. Innocence assumes things will “just get better” or “be okay in the end.” Trauma has a strong tendency to remove this assumption. In some cases, it makes this assumption feel offensive, not just absent.

Innocence is not the same as naivety. Innocence is good. One of the things that will make heaven a place of eternal peace is the restoration of our innocence. Because innocence is good, the loss of innocence should be grieved. Grief is how we rightly celebrate the goodness of something lost until God restores it; partially-progressively here on earth and completely in heaven.

8. **Loss of Childhood:** Trauma in childhood robs us of more than innocence, it robs us of the ability to develop physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually with the assumption we will be cared for. Each aspect of our development must reckon with the presence of this trauma and seek to make sense of it.

Grieving is itself a return to childhood. When we grieve we get to be small, distracted, and cared for. It is not the same as getting to live relatively care free from the ages of 3 to 18, but, in the absence of this opportunity, grief is a step towards experiencing something child-like as an adult.

9. **Loss of Virginity:** In cases of sexual trauma, this can be one of the most profound sources of shame. It is the nature of sex to create strong emotional bonds, for better or worse, whether sex is chosen or forced. This aspect of sex serves a magnifying role on the effects of trauma involving sex.

It is important to remember virginity can only be given, it cannot be taken. The experience of having sex stolen is not the same as giving yourself to someone in love. God does not judge you for your experience of having sex forced upon you and no future relationship, at least one that is based upon honor, would judge you either.

This lack of judgment, however, does not mean there is no reason to grieve. The association of sex with aggression is an experience to grieve. As we’ve stated several times above, the vulnerability of grieving this experience is a first step towards vulnerability necessary to enjoy sex in marriage as the gift God intended.

10. **Loss of a Sense of God’s Presence:** When pain is near, God feels far. When pain is “up in our face,” God often feels “out of sight.” Pain is such an intense, internal experience that the idea of God being with us, near us, or in us no longer matches up with our experience of life.

While this experience is real (it accurately depicts our experience), it is not true (it does not accurately represent reality). The realness of this experience merits grief. God does not require that our responses be theologically accurate in order to receive his compassion. In the next step, we will seek to counter the falseness of this experience. In this step, it is okay to grieve the felt-realness of God being less close than your pain.

Read Matthew 5:4. It is easy to resent mourning. Whatever causes mourning is bad. But God calls the experience of mourning “blessed.” Why? It is the tenderness of grief that prevents our hearts from growing hard in a broken world. This is why mourning may feel risky; it is the first step in being vulnerable again. You can acknowledge the impact of your suffering and be honest about your suffering story without being vulnerable. Mourning requires placing yourself in a position to be comforted by another. This should begin with God. Let the thoughts you have as you go through these materials become conversations with God. Let God’s knowing be prayerful-confiding not divine-ease-dropping. Then your mourning should be expressed with your counselor, mentor, or close circle of friends who are going through this material with you.

“It is only when we have the courage to truly face the hurt, disappointment, and loss created by abuse that we meet God face to face. Ironically, mourning the losses from past abuse allows us to meet God in the present and provides hope for the future (p. 156).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

Mourning’s Traumatic Twin: Fixation

With trauma, there is an obvious reason we avoid the process of grieving; we already feel like we think about our trauma too much. The thoughts are so sticky we don’t want to do anything that would conjure them back up. This is a valid concern and raises an important question – what is the difference between healthy mourning and unhealthy fixation?

Unfortunately, there is no emotional litmus test to verify the difference in these two experiences. However, we can (a) clarify what fixation and mourning share in common, so we are less prone to assume the overlapping experiences necessarily indicate their counterpart. We can also (b) identify distinguishing marks between fixation and mourning so that we know what to look for in order to rightly identify the emotional experience.

Let’s begin by considering the similarities of mourning and fixation.

- Both are triggered by an undesired life circumstance.
- Both exist on the unpleasant end of the emotional spectrum.
- Both feel justified and logical in light of the triggering experience.
- Neither feels like we are “doing” them but that they are “happening” to us.
- Both involve a high degree of mental repetition.
- Both are seeking to make sense of life in light of the unpleasant experience.
- Both begin to shape the way you interpret the events and people around you.
- Both shape the way you anticipate and prepare for the future.
- Both change the way that you remember past events.

What do you gain from this bulleted list? A realization that none of these criteria are able to distinguish mourning from fixation. Each criterion is true for both. It is as if you were asked to distinguish a square from a rectangle. You could say, “It has four sides and each corner formed a ninety degree angle.” This is true for both a square and a rectangle, so it does not help you differentiate the two shapes.

Why take the time to draw these parallels? Often people believe some of these symptoms always indicate either healthy mourning or unhealthy fixation. When you have these experiences all you know is that you’re hurting. It is not clear whether this pain is part of a healthy or unhealthy process; contributing to a redemptive or destructive story line.

This should give you freedom to consider the criteria that follows. Never will our emotions or motives be as pure as we would like. Your goal at this point is not that you "mourn perfectly" but that your experience be increasingly free from qualities that are indicative of fixation.

- **Fixation Fears Hope but Mourning Trusts Hope.** Do you feel like you have to keep one eye on your fears in order to be safe? Or, are you wrestling to gain a sense of equilibrium in life in spite of your traumatic experience? The first is an example of fixation; the latter is an example of mourning.

Fixation equates hope with naivety; hope becomes a nicer word for gullible. Memory is an exercise in self-protection, not growth. When we fixate on trauma, the ideal of being increasingly free from the grips of the traumatic experience is lost; instead, it is believed that this perpetual preoccupation with the trauma is necessary for safety.

When we give into this temptation then hypervigilance becomes the only "safe" way to think. This pattern of thought is very prone to validation by self-fulfilling prophecy. If our fixation correlates with a period of time in which a trauma does not occur, then – whether our fixation contributed to this safety or not – it "worked."

Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." Those who struggle with post-traumatic symptoms often succumb to believing the solution is to stop hoping. That is the equivalent of a cancer patient concluding, "If chemo leaves me feeling weak, then quitting chemo will make me feel strong." This result is making post-traumatic symptoms, especially those of the hyper vigilant variety, chronic.

- **Fixation Resents Joy but Mourning Longs for Joy.** When we have not or cannot experience something, we often begin to resent it as way to silence our longing for it. The resentment only half works. It does devalue the thing in question, but it also focuses attention on it through the act of resenting.

This emotional transvaluation (flipping of values) is not as intentional as the description above might imply. We usually don't choose to do this like the child with poor grades might choose to resent the children with good grades. But when joy begins to feel "out of range for us" and we begin to respond negatively to the possibility of having joy again the possibility of healthy mourning has devolved into fixation.

- **Wallowing Is Skeptical Towards Faith but Mourning Listens to Faith.** Who or what you are willing to listen to says a great deal about you. When mourning gives way to fixation hearing words of faith – from Scripture or a friend – begin to be heard through a filter of mistrust or cynicism.

Consider for a moment how you listen to a news program that does not share your political views or a telemarketer who is telling about a life-changing product. Compare this to how you hear statements of faith in the midst of your post-traumatic experience.

The more you instinctively hear these messages with skepticism the more mourning has given way to fixation. Initially, you just want the experience of trauma to not be so central that it reigns with skeptical-interpretive-priority over any "good news" that comes into your world.

Your initial goal should not necessarily be to fully embrace the messages of faith you're hearing. You can begin much smaller; just hear these messages neutrally and know they're intended for your good. Even if this initially causes you to feel sad, it is a step towards transforming fixation into mourning.

- **Wallowing Resists Being Strong but Mourning Embraces Strength.** Both mourning and fixation are exhausting. Mourning results in the exhaustion of a marathon runner – someone who realizes their journey has value and will become a mark of strength. Fixation results in the chronic fatigue of someone who has soured under the hardships of life – someone who is giving up.

Either way the exhaustion is real. The marathon runner and the embittered soul are both legitimately tired; neither is faking their fatigue. The question is whether you view where you are as hopeless or as another point in your journey of relying on God's willingness to sustain you. You have relied on God's grace to this point – willingly or reluctantly – and that same grace is available for whatever journey lies ahead.

Do not confuse the metaphor of running with the need to rush. If that were the case, then we would not be at the mid-point of a nine step journey. Neither should you begin to view God as a cruel track coach. The things you learn in this experience are not necessarily "God trying to teach you a lesson" (in the harsh connotation of that phrase). Too often we view every lesson we learn in suffering as God's purpose statement for that experience; this causes us to mistrust our source of strength during these times.

- **Wallowing Avoids Being Known but Mourning Invites Community.** The points above focus on the intrapersonal differences between mourning and fixating – those things going on inside of us. This final point looks at an interpersonal difference – how we relate to others differently.

“Groups lend a kind of formality and ritual solemnity to individual grief; they help the survivor and wants to pay homage to her losses in the past and to repopulate her life in the present (228).” Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

When mourning turns into fixation we resist allowing others to know us well; often because of shame or resentment. We become slippery – able to answer people’s questions without allowing them to really know us. With time, we begin to cynically disbelieve that others care or are able to understand.

The reality is that we limit how much we can be cared for by others with how much we make ourselves known to them. If we are 50% known, then we will (at best) be able to receive 50% of the care they offer. Shame convinces us that “if they really knew” they would not mean what they said or do what they did. The result is a corruption of each act of kindness or word of encouragement offered to us.

Using these criteria, how would you describe your current response to your trauma: mourning or fixation? Which criteria gave you the most insight about your response?

How to Mourn

Hopefully you have identified what you are mourning and learned more about the destructive counterfeit of mourning—wallowing. But the question remains, “How do I mourn? It doesn’t seem right to have a funeral. There is nothing to bury. So how do I mourn?”

Read Joel 1:1-2:25. Often we quote Joel 2:25 without seeing the journey that preceded it. Christian grief is grief-with-hope because of the power of God’s resurrection (1 Thes. 4:13-18). We know that God can, and ultimately will, “restore to you the years that the swarming locust have eaten.” But notice how God used mourning as preparation to receive this promise (1:8-9, 1:12-14, 2:12-13). In this passage of Scripture they were mourning their personal sin. You are mourning your suffering. But the principle remains applicable, mourning is an important preparation to the work God intends to do in our life. When we miss this we begin to feel guilty and condemned by God for participating in this preparatory work of restoration He is doing in our lives.

Mourning is not nearly as active or voluntary as we want it to be. We want to master it so we can accelerate the process. Attempts to do so are generally unhealthy, so if that is what you are hoping for, the points below may disappoint you. But the five points below will give you as practical and active guidance as possible to help you grieve the losses you have experienced related to your experience of depression-anxiety.

1. **Realize mourning is not an event you can calendar.** There is no recipe or time table. Mourning is not a matter of crying for five consecutive hours with intermittent twenty minutes breaks of written reflection on painfully relevant questions with a concluding ceremony of destroying what you’ve written. Mourning may involve crying and reflection. It may even be assisted by symbolically destroying what you’ve written. But these steps, nor any others, “are mourning.”

Mourning requires letting yourself be weak and cared for by God in light of your suffering. The experience of trauma has made being “out of control” like this seem very unsettling. But it is this willingness or regained ability to surrender yourself to God’s protection that is the primary evidence that mourning is having its intended redemptive effect.

“You don’t need to be fixed (p. 1)... Cars and refrigerators break down; people don’t. We shed tears, cry, or weep. We were created to cry. It’s a fitting response to sorrow (p. 32)... Grief brings you into the world of the unknown (p. 4)... Grieving is a disorderly process. You won’t control it, nor can you schedule its expression (p.12).” H. Norman Wright in *Experiencing Grief*

2. **Do not feel rushed.** We would rather know if we are “on pace” than if we’re “mourning healthily.” If there was a set time table, then we would know how close we were to being finished. But time’s role in grief is more similar to a gymnastics floor routine than a stop-watch in sprinting. Sprinting is all about making the time number as small as possible. Gymnastics has to do with how well you perform your allotted task within the given time.

If the gymnast tries to “go fast” there is no advantage (likely a detriment) to her final score. Similarly, when we try to accelerate the grieving process we usually introduce unhealthy practices or beliefs that add to the emotional disruption. When we focus upon being as healthy as possible in the process we receive the best “score” – a healthy outcome that honors God.

- 3. **Rest in God’s care before next stage of journey.** A primary indicator that you are ready to begin the next step is when you can view this step as revealing God’s care for you. When you can view this step as God giving you rest rather than putting you in “emotional time out” you are likely ready to continue.

However, with that said, you will not finish mourning before beginning next step six. There will still be times when your losses illicit fresh sadness. But you will have the skills to process those emotions and, more than the skills, you will have a trust in God’s care for you that will give you the emotional freedom to process those moments.

- 4. **Your goal is to assimilate steps 1-3 without the contamination of step 4.** The goal of healthy grief is to accept hard realities without the corrupting narrative of destructive lies. In this material, that means you accept the things you learned in steps 1-3 without encasing them in whichever narratives you were most prone to in step 4.

Initially this may feel disorienting, especially if you have held to the destructive narratives from chapter four for an extended period of time. In chapter six we will examine the redemptive narrative that can make healthier, better sense of your experience.

In the meantime, you may feel like a person without a story. But realize that is like the sprayer being unloaded of herbicide (plant killer) before it can be reloaded with fertilizer. You are being emptied, not to be left bare, but to be filled with something life-giving and nourishing instead of emotionally toxic. Your narrative loss is actually a gain. Once it is replaced it will be an incomparable gain.

- 5. **Realize sadness is not the final chapter.** This bold promise should be tempered; otherwise it could easily become false hope. Losing your suffering story is a gain. Embracing the gospel narrative for your suffering is incomparable gain. But you are still living in the middle of the story.

With the gospel we always live between the “already” and the “not yet.” The power of sin is already broken, but the presence of sin is not yet removed. The promise of heaven is already given, but the experience of heaven is not yet known. The remedy of suffering is already guaranteed, but the existence of suffering is not yet eliminated.

In the gospel we are able to live without doubt but with only partial relief. Through sanctification – living out the character and mind of God in our circumstances by his grace – we experience incrementally more relief. But this relief is not total until God wipes away our last tear as we permanently enter his presence (Rev. 21:4).

“It occurs to the survivor that perhaps the trauma is not the most important, or even the most interesting, part of her life story... She will never forget. She will think of the trauma every day as long as she lives. She will grieve every day. But the time comes when the trauma no longer commands the central place in her life (p. 195).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Conclusion

Realize that God is not rushing you on your journey through your traumatic experience. If anything, we are often disappointed by God’s patience. We want God to push us through the process faster. But God is the ultimate gentleman, honoring us on at every stage of our journey.

There is no merit in a slow or fast journey through the impact of trauma. All God desires of / for us is faithfulness. This step has been intended to help you embrace this truth. As you take the remaining steps to combat your experience of trauma, do so with the full assurance that God agrees with your tears when you cry out “this is hard.” You do not have to argue with one who is well acquainted with grief (Isa 53:3). He is the Good Shepherd who is willing to tenderly walk at the pace of his sheep.

Encouragement Focus (MOURN):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- Have you honestly accessed what losses you are mourning?
- Are you actively guarding against allowing this time of mourning degenerating into fixation?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 6.

“Accepting Challenges to Overcome Them in God’s Strength”

LEARN MY GOSPEL STORY by which God gives meaning to my experience.

**“I have already told you how my trauma shaped my life [review step 4].
Letting go of that story, identity, and set of beliefs left me with only God.
It was good to begin rebuilding my life from that solid foundation.
Now I am beginning to understand my life with God and the Gospel at the center
[examples from previous list reinterpreted].”**

Memorize: 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 (ESV), “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “I pleaded” – God does not condemn Paul’s desire to be free from the “thorn in his flesh.” It is good to ask for this.
- “Grace is sufficient” – We see that God’s grace is sufficient even when it does not remove the trial we face.
- “Boast” – Merely resisting the shame and despair commonly associated with trauma is a step in this direction.
- “Content with weakness” – This may be a more accurate depiction of what Paul’s day-to-day boasting was like.
- “When I am weak” – When Paul was okay with his weakness he was able to face life at full strength.

Teaching Notes

“The cross doesn’t answer all of our questions about human suffering, but it assures us of God’s compassion for human misery (p. 176)... Those who suffer often feel isolated and disconnected from others. They often feel no one really understands what they are experiencing... The beauty of the cross is that it connects Jesus with our suffering, particularly the suffering produced by abuse (p. 176).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“[Jesus] is a Man of Sorrows and intimate with grief. He was left alone, regarded with contempt. He is scarred for all eternity. His suffering has left its tracks across his face. His hands and feet carry marks of the violence done to him. He was afflicted, struck, crushed, stripped, and oppressed. Suffering does that, you know; it leaves its mark over those who must endure (p. 31)... Jesus was storming the gates of hell even while he bowed himself to our finitude and brokenness (p. 57).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

“Even after release from captivity, the victim cannot assume her former identity. Whatever new identity she develops and freedom must include the memory of her enslaved self (p. 93).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“We’re more than what we have suffered, and that is the reason we can do something with our memory of it – integrated into our life story, turn it into a junction from which we set out on new paths, for instance (p. 80)... All three elements of the healing of memories – a new identity, new possibilities, and an integrated life story – drew their basic content from the memory of the Passion understood as a new Exodus, a new deliverance (p. 103)... Wrongdoing does not have the last word. If we remember a wrongdoing – no matter how horrendous – through the lens of remembering the Exodus, we will remember that wrongdoing as a moment in the history of those who are already on their way to deliverance (p. 108-109).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

“We do not need for all of our life to be gathered and rendered meaningful in order to be truly and finally redeemed... No need to take all of our experiences, distinct and company and bind them together in a single volume so that each experience draws meaning from the whole as well as contributes meaning to the whole. It suffices to leave some experiences untouched (say, that daily walk I took to school in the second grade), treat others with the care of a healing hand and then abandon them to the darkness of non-remembrance (say, the interrogations by Captain G.), and gather and reframe the rest (say, the joy in the struggle of writing this book) (p. 192).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

Embedded Study

When you experienced your trauma, life stopped, at least parts of your life stopped, yet the rest of life has continued in a way that can be both disorienting and offensive. So far this study has been a major deconstruction project; we have broken down your experience and its fallout in many ways. The result is, while you may feel like there is hope for things to be better, you likely also feel like a person without a story.

That is what this chapter begins to address. In this chapter you will begin to put the pieces you deconstructed into a new narrative; not a narrative that makes the “sad things untrue” but a narrative that allows you to understand yourself, God, your life, and the future in ways that are healthy and hopeful.

This new narrative will likely not answer the nagging “why” question. Think about most suspenseful movies you’ve seen or books you’ve read. When is the “why” plot revealed? At the end. Where are you in your journey? Still in the middle. It is unlikely at this stage in the journey that, however God intends to redeem your experience, that this could be clear to you now. Guessing at God’s intention will likely place you in a series of all-or-nothing moments where you try to seize a moment to make your trauma experience seem “worth it,” only to be disappointed or make the experience worse.

Instead, at this stage in your journey, it is recommended that you seek to understand yourself, God, others, your setting, and your future in a way that both sets you up for stable-healthy living now and allows for redemptive moments where your experience can be used for a larger purpose when the situation is wise. We will seek to do this by walking you through five questions that help you identify key ways God would have you understand your experience.

1. Who Am I Now?
2. Who and Where Is God?
3. Where Am I?
4. Is Hope Worth Fear?
5. What Am I Living For?

Who Am I Now?

The experience of trauma does not allow us to “move on” with life “as if nothing happened.” At the same time, we do not want to believe that this experience should define us. We have an identity and dreams that transcend this experience, yet they are inevitably shaped by our trauma. How do we make sense of this?

Changed and Unchanged

You are living with a real tension. You are the same person you have always been. But also life is different and so you are different. Both realities have to be reckoned with in order for you to make sense of your experience in a healthy way.

First, you are you and will always and only be you. You are the person living the life and story God has given you to live. The “new you” cannot write a letter to the “old you” (or vice versa) and it be read by two different people. When you think of yourself as “a different person” you give your trauma the same significance as your birth and conversion (new birth). It is important for you to know that there is a “you” that transcends these painful events.

Second, you are less naive than you were. Events and experiences cannot be unlearned. You may begin marking time as “before” or “after” your trauma. This is appropriate for any major life event – graduation, marriage, having children, the loss of a parent, retirement, etc... It’s just that trauma intrudes into our lives without warning. Also, certain actions, words, places, or emotions may not be experienced the same way again. This is the effect of every life experience (we are changing day by day), but traumatic moments create more change that is unwanted in a very short period of time.

Read Galatians 2:20. In this verse we see Paul wrestling with the changed-unchanged dynamic. Paul is changed – “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” Paul is unchanged – “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith.” Paul was no less dependent upon God after his conversion than he was before. It was just that after his conversion, Paul realized how dependent upon God he was. Similarly, as you grapple with how you are both changed and unchanged many of the things you “know-know” now here true before you appreciated their full weight. Paul was probably shocked at how cavalierly or unprepared he lived before his conversion. Similarly, you may experience a sense of fear-guilt for how naively you may lived before your trauma. After conversion we see God’s protection over our pre- and post-conversion life. Similarly, you need to begin to see God’s protection over your changed-unchanged life.

Question: How has trying to make sense of life as either-or, changed-or-unchanged, made it harder for you to gain a sense of peace or stability? How does this both-and mindset alleviate those challenges?

Strong Enough to Be Weak

Hopefully one of the primary things you’ve gained from this study is the strength to be weak. Nothing makes us crumble at our core like the perceived need to be stronger than we are. Conversely, nothing maximizes the strength God gives us like the freedom to acknowledge our need for grace, help, and encouragement.

Having the language to describe your experience and the awareness to know that others who experience trauma face similar challenges afterwards should give you the social strength to be weak. Knowing that God understands your experience and is compassionate towards suffering should give you the spiritual strength to be weak. Realizing that “weak” is not a derogatory social class under “the strong” (which is a fictional class of people we think could handle trauma), should remove the shame associated with being weak.

Read Matthew 5:3-6. The beatitudes are the epitome of being “strong enough to be weak.” In each beatitude Jesus describes a state of being that we would find undesirable as “blessed.” Yet, with a little reflection, we realize that it is trying to be what we consider “strong” that exhausts us. When we are willing to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry, and thirsty we find that life is better. We find there is more strength in willful God-dependency than in self-sufficiency.

Question: How have you grown in your willingness to be “strong enough to be weak” during your experience of trauma?

Capable of Influential Choices

Being weak does not mean being voiceless or lacking the will to challenge things that are wrong or undesirable around you. Balancing the emotional freedom of being able to be weak with the volitional freedom of having a voice is one of the great post-traumatic challenges. It is another area where we are prone to think in either-or categories rather than both-and.

Begin by making a list of important choices you are free to make which are unrelated to your trauma. Never allow yourself to view these parts of life as insignificant. If you do, then only those parts of your life where your trauma holds its strongest influence will be deemed significant. That centralizes your trauma in a way that will cause it to always dominate your life story.

- Examples: matters related to caring for people who are important to you, eating a healthy diet, exercising to care for your body, practicing your faith, etc...

Now make a list of the important choices you can make in response to the effects of trauma in your life. In step seven, we will expand the number of strategies and responses available to you. The longer and more effective this list becomes the less powerless you will feel.

- Examples: If you struggle to identify choices to place on this list or the next, you will receive examples in step seven.

Finally, make a list of the choices you can make to remove the presence of this type of trauma from your life and the life of others. If your trauma cannot be removed (i.e., the experience of law enforcement officers entering life-threatening situations to save others), then make a list of the redemptive benefits your sacrifice provides.

Read Psalm 127:1-2. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the influence of your choices and begin to think that all the pressure to make the world a safe place again is on you. Psalm 127 speaks to this experience. It does not refute the efforts of house builders and watchmen. Both are good and warranted. But it emphasizes that God makes effective our efforts. Our role is merely faithfulness. As you think about the influence of your choices, remind yourself that it is God who blesses these choices so that he can give you “his beloved sleep” (v. 2).

Question: How have you grown in your ability to see the influence of your choices while resting in God’s utilization them?

Who and Where Is God?

There are many God-questions that arise during and after the experience of trauma. It is nearly impossible to persistently battle for hope and peace without asking questions directed to or about God. The things discussed below should not be new. They are meant to be crystallizations of what you've been learning. Allow these truths about God to become cemented in your story; these truths should increasingly feel like "refuges" as opposed to "wouldn't it be nice" statements.

"Because Satan seeks to distance us from God by distorting all of his wonderful attributes, it's essential for abuse survivors to clarify who God really is (p. 172)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

God is Near to Those Who Are Suffering

There is a danger in reading our Bibles in search for God's answer to trauma. It begins to make God feel like an absentee father; as if all he offers us is a letter in the mail. A letter would mean both that God cared and that he was far away. This would be both encouraging and disheartening; God's words would seem sincere but powerless. This is why we must pay careful attention to the thing God most repeats and we most overlook when he speaks about depression-anxiety.

Read I Peter 5:6-9 and Philippians 4:5-9. The most neglected aspect of both of these passages is the nearness of God. We come to these passages seeking God's "answer" for the thing that causes us to be afraid. As we search for principles and practical steps, we miss that the first and main thing God offers is himself. When we doubt or rush past God's presence, we begin to expect knowledge to accomplish what only relationship can provide. Yes, God does offer us strategies and truths to combat effects of trauma, but these are not the first and most important things he offers.

Pause and ask yourself, where have you seen evidence of the nearness of God? Don't short-circuit the question with; "if God were near, then the trauma would not have happened." This criterion blinds us to all of God's care. We become like the children who cannot receive any of their parent's love or care after an event that damaged their trust. The response may be understandable, but it makes the damage of mistrust permanent.

Question: As you reflect on the evidences of God's nearness, how can you call these to mind during hard times?

Our Pioneer

People who have experienced trauma want to know that someone has been where they are and come out on the other side. Has anyone known this level of betrayal, pain, and rejection? If so, can I learn from their example? Even better, could I draw from their strength and find a way to be infused with their victory? These kinds of questions are generally met with an awkward smirk that communicates "wouldn't it be nice." But the answer to these questions is, "Yes!" The answer to these questions is, "That is what the gospel is all about."

"[Jesus] is a Man of Sorrows and intimate with grief. He was left alone, regarded with contempt. He is scarred for all eternity. His suffering has left its tracks across his face. His hands and feet carry marks of the violence done to him. He was afflicted, struck, crushed, stripped, and oppressed. Suffering does that, you know; it leaves its mark over those who must endure (p. 31)... Jesus was storming the gates of hell even while he bowed himself to our finitude and brokenness (p. 57)." Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

God pioneered the road you are traveling. It was an impossible road before His God-man feet cleared the path you are struggling to walk. By His grace, we have in the gospel both the map and the resources by which to travel it. As you find yourself wanting to give up or wondering if it's possible, reflect on what it was like to walk this road with no forerunner carrying the weight of the world's sin. Don't use that image to discount your struggle, but to grow in appreciation for Jesus' sacrifice. Your experience should magnify your understanding of what Jesus did. What Jesus did doesn't minimize what you're going through.

Read Hebrews 12:1-3. Notice it says to "consider" Christ "so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (v. 3)." What does it say you should consider in order to gain this encouragement? Part of the reflection is that Jesus walked "despising the shame (v. 2)" of his journey. Jesus really did walk the road you are on. He has carried the weight alone and offers to share your load with you (Mathew 11:28-30). In this way, the summary of how the gospel ministers to sin is the same as the summary of how the gospel ministers to suffering – Jesus in my place.

Question: What encouragement do you take from knowing that Jesus was your victorious pioneer on this difficult road?

Capable of Transforming Suffering

We often think that transformation requires elimination. We want the transformation of our traumatic experience to result in the elimination of symptoms related to our trauma. This is not a bad desire, but it would require removing this experience from our story (the impossibility of rewriting history) rather than redeeming the presence of the trauma within our story.

We think of the elimination model of transformation because it is most common in our experience. We see it when a water droplet is transformed to vapor; the droplet no longer exists. But God’s transformation of suffering is usually much more like the change in our memories of a loved one during grief. These memories transform from experiences of pain to precious treasures (that may still evoke sadness).

The memory of our trauma will never have the sweetness of our memories of a loved one who has passed, but this example does provide of us an example of something painful that has been transformed without being eliminated and helps us remember that the presence of pain does not mean the absence of God’s redemptive work in our suffering.

Read Hebrews 11:13-16. Notice this awkward interlude in the midst of Hebrews 11, a chapter commonly referred to as the “Hall of Faith.” We would say that God worked mightily in the life of each of these individuals. They are the upper echelon heroes of the Bible. But also notice that the cliff notes-highlights we read from their life are not the same as their experience of these events. Their experience of following God by faith is much more similar to your experiencing of trusting God in the midst and aftermath of trauma than you might have thought.

Question: How does the idea of transformation without elimination change your expectations of what it would mean for God to work redemptively in your traumatic experience? _____

Where Am I?

Confidence in your ability to accurately interpret your surroundings is important. After trauma it can begin to feel like your assessment of your setting is either over optimistic or pessimistic; either you’re trying to convince yourself everything is fine or looking for the pending source of danger. The result is either fluctuating sense of mistrust or blind-trust that makes rest seem very difficult.

In a Dangerous World

Trauma does not make our world more dangerous than it was before; it opens our eyes to dangers of which we were blissfully ignorant. The beauty of ignorance is that it allows us not to ask certain vexing questions. The question now becomes, how do we not see what we know is possible?

We don’t “unsee” it through willful denial. Willful denial is a means of silencing your own voice. We know when we’ve just taken the batteries out of our emotional smoke detectors, and silence no longer brings peace. Instead, acknowledge and gauge the danger that is around you. After a trauma the presence of any danger or uncertainty registers as “code red.”

Part of the journey to peace of mind after trauma is re-establishing more degrees on your emotional safety thermometer. This can be done by asking yourself two questions, “What is the actual level of concern my situation warrants? What is an appropriate response to this level of concern?” It may take a while to be satisfied again with situationally-appropriate responses. But learning to accept and respond to day-to-day levels of danger is better than fluctuating between the all-or-nothing responses of denial-and-panic.

Read Matthew 10:16-24. Notice that Jesus goes out of his way not to minimize the dangers his disciples would experience. Reading his descriptions may even be unsettling. In response to these, Jesus calls his disciples to be “wise as serpents” (v. 16). Knowing and assessing the danger, Jesus wanted his disciples to take appropriate pre-cautions. Yet this vigilance, not

hypervigilance, should still leave them "innocent as doves" (v. 16). There is an awareness of danger than does not rob us of peace. Likewise, there is a sense of trust that does not make us passive. Whether you feel like you consistently live in that spot now or not, know that God does not expect you to live alternating between bracing and pretending.

Question: What evidences have you seen of your ability to live in the emotional space between bracing and pretending? What relief do you feel knowing God approves of this? _____

You Are Not Alone

This merits repeating. We can feel alone because (a) we don't think anyone understands or (b) because we don't feel like we have anyone to talk to. This study is designed to counter both of those isolating narratives.

Hopefully in this study you have found vocabulary and concepts that make sense of your experience. Whereas, before, you might have felt unable to articulate your challenges and that was part of what made you feel like you were "crazy;" now you can invite someone into your journey. Allowing Christian friends to support you is what it means to experience the Body of Christ.

"The cross doesn't answer all of our questions about human suffering, but it assures us of God's compassion for human misery (p. 176)... Those who suffer often feel isolated and disconnected from others. They often feel no one really understands what they are experiencing... The beauty of the cross is that it connects Jesus with our suffering, particularly the suffering produced by abuse (p. 176)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

Also, this study provides you with a resource you can use to educate those close to you on how to support you. Sometimes we avoid people, not because we think they don't care, but because we don't think they will understand. The thought of being the educator about our experience before we can be supported on our journey is exhausting. By merely asking someone to study this material along with you, you can avoid being stuck in this dual role.

Read Romans 12:15 and I Corinthians 12:14-26. God does not call your reliance upon others for support at this time "being a burden;" instead God views it as "being part of his body, the church." God made us to live in community so that our pain could not exist without affecting others. God did this as a means of protecting his people and ensuring their care in hard times. In our individualistic culture, this can be hard to accept. Some of the narratives we must throw off are not just the personal meanings we've placed on our experience, but also the cultural values that are at odds with our recovery and God's design for how we live.

Question: What are the experiences of being less alone that you've already begun to experience? What are the steps you could take to make this theme more dominant in your recovery? _____

On a Journey

When the scenery is changing it can be hard to get your bearings. As you process your trauma, you are changing in the ways you would have had the trauma not occurred (i.e., normal maturity) and your experience of the trauma is changing (both based upon the journey of recovery in this study and the way you think about the trauma due to new milestones in your life). All of these factors help to make sense of the frequent disorientation you may feel.

Think of the person who was sexually abused as a child. Processing this trauma will change with time; when they hit puberty and begin having sexual desires themselves, when they marry and sex becomes something that is intended as a good experience to express love, and when they have children and now feel the pressure to protect their child in ways they were unprotected. All of these changes represent a journey.

Also consider how the experience of trauma changes with time. Initially, the intrusive, constrictive, and hyper-arousal symptoms feel foreign and strange. Then they become the unwanted new-normal that is perpetually fought against. With healthy interventions they become less prevalent and intense, but still may be intensely triggered by close associations or life markers (see paragraph above). These changes also represent a journey.

Read Psalm 23. Notice that this well-known Psalm depicts a journey of a sheep with the Good Shepherd through perilous times to a place of safety. The sheep, with whom you are invited to identify, travels through barren country where skill is needed to find green pastures and water (v. 1-3) and traverses dangerous places where the terrain is unsafe and a staff is needed to protect against predators (v. 4) before coming to the place God had prepared for them to ultimately dwell (v. 5-6). Imagine the doubt and fears the sheep must have experienced along the way. Realize that the hope of the sheep was not in its surroundings, but in its companion.

Question: How does understanding your experience as a journey help you not feel as lost or dismayed in moments that are disorienting or feel like a regression? _____

Is Hope Worth Fear?

This is one of the big narrative questions of trauma. If hope can leave me vulnerable again, is it worth it? After trauma we begin to believe that not bracing against impending doom is naïve. This leaves us with a façade of safety, but not much hope. While there is only one healthy answer to this question, after a trauma it is normal to consider writing the rest of our life story without such vulnerability.

“Remember wrongs so that you can protect sufferers from further injury, remember them truthfully so as to be able to act justly, and situate the memories of wrong suffered into the narrative of God's redemption so that you can remember and hope rather than despair (p. 115).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

Absolutely Yes!

Maybe you're not convinced this answer deserves an exclamation point. That is fine at this stage in our journey. But it is important that we understand that “progress” after trauma will require “trusting hope” again. Hope is a good friend who we've grown to doubt because of our trauma. Hope may feel like the person we are intimidated by and think “is too good to be our friend.” Even though we may have acknowledged we were wrong about hope, we still must allow ourselves to trust this friend again before things will fully be “made right.”

How does this happen? Like any other relationship. Acknowledge to God your hesitancy to trust hope and allow the tenderness of his response to prove his faithfulness merits your trust. Begin to allow yourself to hope in “small” areas of your life and stretch yourself to hope in increasingly larger areas of your life. Realize that God is willing to take this journey to restored hope with you. God enjoys the journey with us as much as we desire the destination.

Because trauma comes “all at once” it can be harder now to think about trusting in small areas of life. We allow trauma to define our life in all-or-nothing categories, and because we do not feel like we can be completely trusting, we begin to think we cannot trust at all. God is not that impatient or demanding. Don't allow the theme of trust to be sucked into the all-or-nothing narrative that trauma would want to create for it.

Read Romans 5:1-5. Don't feel rushed by this passage. Even if its conclusion does not represent where you are, it reveals where God plans to take you. This passage represents the promise that guarantees our answer to the question “is hope worth disappointment” can be “yes!” Notice there is a journey: endurance (we don't think we can make it) to character (a growing confidence in God's faithfulness) to hope (a confidence in God's faithfulness that can become contagious to others) to the removal of shame (our fear and despair no longer carry a sense of stigma, but are a marker of God's tender grace). Wherever you are on this journey, simply continue to take the next step.

Question: What are some of the “small areas of life” in which you could begin to live with greater hope? How would seeing hope thaw in these areas boost your morale for the rest of the journey ahead? _____

But It's Okay to Doubt and Believe

Belief and doubt are not mutually exclusive on this journey. Like the person who is shoveling their driveway after an ice storm can sweat, so a person with assurance that “hope is worth fear” can still have doubts. The dominant experience of cold does not prevent the temporal experience of heat; likewise the dominant theme of hope does not preclude seasons of doubt.

It might be easy to work through step-work material like this and think that life should be a steady, uninterrupted progression towards peace and hope. If that is your expectation, then each intrusion of post-traumatic symptoms will feel like a relapse (borrowing from addiction language).

What does this mean at the practical level? It means you can listen to your doubts without fear that they mean you're back at step one. It means you can learn from your doubts without feeling like you've betrayed God. It means you can doubt your doubts, seeing them as a subplot of your story instead of the main story, without being a hypocrite. It means doubt does not have to be as dangerous as it feels when you handle it in the overarching story of God's care for you.

Read Mark 9:14-29. As you read, let verse 24 be the apex of the story; where the father says to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Notice there is no rebuke from Jesus towards the father. This belief-with-acknowledged-doubt was enough. As you seek to cling to these themes of a gospel narrative against the suffering story you articulated in step four, this prayer is all God expects of you as well. Rest in the fact that you don't need perfect faith, but merely honest faith that clings to God even during the dark times of doubt.

Question: How would this relationship to doubt change the hard times when you just want to give up? How is being vulnerably honest with God about your doubts its own form of faith in God's care for you? _____

What Am I Living For?

The Same Things Differently

This is an extension of the “you” that is “unchanged.” In step nine you will spend more time reflecting on this, but for this stage in your journey, realize that anything that was important or enjoyable to you before is still viable. What talents did you enjoy expressing? What causes brought you joy to advance? What activities added energy and vitality to your life?

Now you may enjoy these things differently. The poet may find new themes emerging in his poetry. The runner may find new significance in the endurance required in a long run. The caretaker may see those she cares for with new eyes. The leader may have new appreciation for the challenges of those being led.

Too often, however, life-changing moments like a trauma, are believed to change everything. This need not be the case, although it's not bad if certain interests do change. Allow yourself to re-engage your previous interests. Be open to new perspectives on the same interests. If the interest is no longer satisfying or feels tainted beyond enjoyment, grieve that loss.

Read Philippians 3:1-11. This may seem like an odd passage for this section, but notice that both before and after his conversion Paul was a leader. His cause radically changed, but his interest did not. This is the typical pattern for life-changing events in Scripture. Usually the disposition and interest of the person does not change all that radically. God takes that same person, with the same personality and same skill sets, but uses them in a new way. They were both “a new person” and recognizable. No one would have been surprised to see Paul being a leader at whatever he did and Paul would not have enjoyed life doing anything but being a leader.

Question: What are things you enjoyed or were passionate about before your experience of trauma? What did you enjoy about them? How has that changed? How do you see God using your personality and gifting at this time? _____

And Maybe Some New Things

This is an extension of the “you” that is “changed.” Traumas have a way of showing us what really matters. Doubtless, some things that were really important to you before seem trivial now; making room for new interests. Other things that you took for granted are probably now treasured; requiring more time than you gave them before.

Unlike most of the other changes experienced in the aftermath of a trauma, these changes are almost universally considered “good.” In light of the frailty of life, the things that we choose to give our attention to are generally the “most important things.”

If this is a large part of your experience, don't spend much time repenting or regretting your misguided priorities before. Repent and then begin to live a life investing in the things that are most important.

In step nine you'll consider whether and how to incorporate your experience of trauma into your life purpose. Some people feel they are not stewarding their trauma well if they do not make countering their trauma's presence in the world a significant part of their life mission. However, as you will see, your calling by God is to steward all of your life, not just your trauma. So it may be that you find that God has gifted and positioned you in a way that means you can make more impact for his kingdom by focusing on something other than countering your traumatic experience.

Read II Corinthians 1:3-5. Let your focus be on the phrase “in any affliction” (v. 4). Realize that God comforts us in order to equip us to care for others, but what we learn of God and his care in our affliction is not limited in its application to only similar afflictions. As you begin to consider what the next stage of life holds for you, which is appropriate as you transition from “disempowering the memory” (steps 4-6) to “re-engaging life and relationships” (steps 7-9), do not allow your experience of trauma to be a limiting factor on your considerations; that would be centralizing your experience of trauma in your life story in a new way. You may choose to make countering your trauma part of your life calling, but let it be because it is the best fit for how God has equipped you and not because you feel like it is a necessity of honoring God in light of the traumatic experience.

Question: How have you seen your interests and passions change as a result of your trauma? Which of those changes are good? What new interests or priorities have emerged? How central do you want countering your trauma to be to your life calling?

Summary Reflection: As you have worked through this chapter what would you say are the most important aspects of your story that you are beginning to see differently? As you begin to embrace those things as the accurate interpretation of your emotional struggle, how do you anticipate that changing your post-traumatic experience?

“We're more than what we have suffered, and that is the reason we can do something with our memory of it – integrated into our life story, turn it into a junction from which we set out on new paths, for instance (p. 80)...All three elements of the healing of memories – a new identity, new possibilities, and an integrated life story – drew their basic content from the memory of the Passion understood as a new Exodus, a new deliverance (p. 103)... Wrongdoing does not have the last word. If we remember a wrongdoing – no matter how horrendous – through the lens of remembering the Exodus, we will remember that wrongdoing as a moment in the history of those who are already on their way to deliverance (p. 108-109).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

“We do not need for all of our life to be gathered and rendered meaningful in order to be truly and finally redeemed... No need to take all of our experiences, distinct and company and bind them together in a single volume so that each experience draws meaning from the whole as well as contributes meaning to the whole. It suffices to leave some experiences untouched (say, that daily walk I took to school in the second grade), treat others with the care of a healing hand and then abandon them to the darkness of non-remembrance (say, the interrogations by Captain G.), and gather and reframe the rest (say, the joy in the struggle of writing this book) (p. 192).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

Encouragement Focus (GOSPEL STORY):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- What are the healthy themes of the gospel that you most need to assimilate into how you make sense of your traumatic experience?
- Are you able to identify the specific times in your life when you most need to allow these new interpretations to penetrate your thinking, emotions, and choices?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 7

“Re-Engaging Life and Relationships”

IDENTIFY GOALS that allow me to combat the impact of my suffering.

**“I can now see that innocence and powerlessness are not the same thing.
I used to think ‘it was not my fault;’ was the same as ‘there is nothing I can do.’
My old suffering story came with a way of life that I lived.
The new story, identity, and beliefs that come with the Gospel
allow me to actively live differently without giving into the old false shame or guilt.
I can change [describe how] without a sense of condemnation [describe why].”**

Memorize: Lamentations 3:20-24 (ESV), “My soul remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “My soul remembers” – As Jeremiah remembered his suffering it registered with him at a level deeper than his brain.
- “Bowed down” – The presence of the memory still, at times, created a sense of wilting in his soul.
- “I call to mind” – Jeremiah gained the ability to direct his thoughts even when the memories of his suffering intruded.
- “New every morning” – However persistent his suffering memories may be, Jeremiah knew God’s mercies last longer.
- “Your faithfulness” – This is the first time in the passage Jeremiah directly addressed God (“you”). As he engaged the false interpretations of his suffering, Jeremiah was able to regain his more personal connection with God.

Teaching Notes

“In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged, were deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationships with other people, they must be reformed in such relationships (p. 133)... The simple statement—‘I know I have myself’—could stand as the emblem of the third and final stage of recovery. The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of herself (p. 202).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“Past wrongdoing suffered can be localized on the timeline of our life story and stopped from spilling forward into the present and future to flood the whole of our life (p. 82).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

“One of the most empowering things an abuse survivor can do is to prayerfully hand shame back to his or her abuser. Theologians rarely discuss this concept, but it’s a frequent biblical theme. Biblical writers often asked God to shame their abusive enemies. Most likely, this meant asking God to do two things: (1) cause the abuser to be overwhelmed with shame for his or her sin so that they would repent, and (2) bring utter destruction on the abuser if he or she didn’t repent (p. 89)... For survivors of abuse, the most damaging definitions of forgiveness are those that conflate forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation and eliminate the possibility of negative consequences for the offender (p. 181-182).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“Genuine trust involves allowing another to matter and have an impact in our lives (p. 175).” Dan Allender in *Wounded Heart*

“Recovery—learning not to live based on the fear—must also occur in the context of relationship. It cannot occur in isolation. Fear destroys trust. Fear inhibits love. Fear results in construction, restraint, retreat. All of these profoundly affect our relationships (p. 151)... Learning to tell ‘normal’ hurt from ‘abnormal’ hurt is a difficult process. Learning how to respond when you are hurt and either way is also difficult (p. 170)... Fear guards; love welcomes. Fear hides; love pursues. Fear shuts up; love expresses. Fear panics; love waits. Fear keeps a record; love forgives graciously. To move out of here and into love is a tremendous shift (p. 171).” Diane Langberg in *On the Threshold of Hope*

“Power is the ability to produce desired effects (p. 78)... Survivors also see themselves as powerless to make good things happen or bad thing stop; at the same time, they see themselves as having excessive power to call batterer evil in the lives of others (p. 88).” Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

Embedded Study

One of the biggest challenges in identifying goals for combatting the effects of suffering is to be active without accepting false guilt. It is easy to think if there is something I “can do” to offset the impact of my suffering, then it is something I “should have been doing” all along.

In order to help you avoid this mindset, we will arrange the strategies for combatting the impact of your suffering around the three areas of symptoms most common to the post-traumatic experience.

1. Settling Hyper-Arousal Symptoms
2. Countering Intrusive Symptoms
3. Lessening Constrictive Symptoms

The intent is to help you see that, because the presence or magnification of these symptoms did not begin until you experienced your trauma, that they are not things you “should have been doing all along” that would have “prevented the trauma in the first place.”

Many of these approaches do have application in normal-everyday life. This is because re-engaging life and relationships is a very normal-everyday activity. Don’t allow this to become a point of self-condemnation (i.e., “I must be an idiot if this is all I should have been doing”) or short-cutting (i.e., “I can stop this study now, the information is getting simple”).

These are the steps that solidify the progress you’ve made on your journey. These are the steps you’ll return to when you face an unexpected, intense trigger in the future. These are the steps that will help prevent future experiences of suffering from revitalizing your old suffering story (step four) by making your progress seem like a façade.

Settling Hyper-Arousal Symptoms

An important part of solidifying a sense of safety from which to engage life is countering the mindset and habits that were generated by hyper-arousal symptoms. Being perpetually “on guard” does not allow us to feel safe (emotional response) even when we’ve convinced ourselves there is no reasonable, imminent threat (cognitive assessment).

The primary objective in countering hyper-arousal symptoms is staying grounded in the present so that you can focus on those things to which you want to give your attention. This may sound simple, but it is not easy. Take encouragement from the fact that your objective is not complex without beating yourself up when it is difficult.

Lessening the Habits of Hypervigilance

Post-traumatic symptoms create a “way of life” designed (often without intentionality) to keep you safe. Therefore, as you change this way of life, it may create a sense of being in danger. This would only be true if your hyper vigilant response was still warranted and was providing more relief than burden. If this were the case, you would not have persisted to this point in the study.

As you think about how a past traumatic event can create a lifestyle consider the following points from Steve Viars’ book (p. 131) in *Putting Your Past in Its Place*.

- Today’s reactions become tomorrow’s habits.
- Today’s choices become tomorrow’s influences.
- Today’s anger becomes tomorrow’s bitterness.
- Today’s thoughts become tomorrow’s beliefs.
- Today’s desires become tomorrow’s idols.

The approach we will take to countering this dynamic will be twofold: (1) become aware of the moments when you are responding out of hyper-arousal habit, so that (2) you can relax in those moments and change your relationships to these responses. This is different from merely trying to “stop being anxious.” The goal is to relate to the anxiety differently. In effect, you will be thanking your anxiety for the way it kept you safe in the past but letting it know that its services will no longer be needed. You will only actually be free from anxiety if you have a calm-controlled “break up” with the emotion.

Begin by continuing to become more aware of when your response has more to do with your past experience of trauma than your present experience of threat. When these moments come, have a dialogue with yourself that might sound like this:

“I am anxious. Something about this moment reminds me of the past, or I am not yet fully comfortable being relaxed. That is okay. God is patient with me as I grow in this area, so I should be patient with myself. The important thing to do now is to stop fighting my anxiety (which only makes it worse) and remind myself that may be anxiety is no longer necessary. Once I have done that I can use relaxation techniques to counter the physiological impact of anxiety and to help my body return to a sense of calm.”

After having this kind of conversation with yourself you can use one of these relaxation techniques to counter the adrenaline surge that a hyper-arousal response will have created.

1. **Breathe:** This technique may sound odd. But deep breathing can have a significant impact upon the experience of anxiety. One area that the body monitors to determine its sense of safety is the temperature of the nasal cavity. When the nasal cavity is hot, it triggers the stress response. When it cools, the body turns off the stress response.

Think of the athlete who begins to breathe through his mouth as he runs. This causes his nasal cavity to heat up and triggers the adrenal system; part of the flight-fight stress response. Adrenaline provides an energy boost and intensifies his emotional state (hence the reactivity at many sporting events).

This is one reason many people feel relaxed when they smoke cigarettes even though nicotine is a stimulant. The calming power of the breathing required to rhythmically inhale a cigarette is more powerful than the medical agent in cigarettes are energizing. Awkwardly, this means many smokers are as addicted to breathing as they are nicotine; especially if their primary appeal to smoking is relaxation.

When you feel anxiety mounting, it is recommend that you take a few deep breaths in through your nose (drawing in cool air) and out through your mouth (exhaling the warmer air away from your nose). This will cool the nasal cavity. It does not extract adrenaline already released, but prevents the release of additional adrenaline. In this sense, it is the emotional equivalent of taking your foot off the gas pedal of your car more than stepping on the brakes.

2. **Pace of Thought Reduction:** Your emotional physiology systems respond, in part, to the pace of your thoughts. Recall the last time you had a conversation with a “fast talker.” You likely walked away from that conversation tense. This is because your mind had to keep up with their pace of speech, and it triggered a mild stress response.

Consider a child who thinks there is a monster in their closet. How are they talking when they tell their parents? Very fast. What is the instinctual response of a caring parent? To help the child tell their story more slowly. This is not just an attempt to understand what is being said, but part of the calming process.

There is something both calming and empowering when you feel the freedom to slow your thoughts. Changing the pace of your thoughts is a great way to remind yourself that you can make choices that matter – not just that change your circumstances, but also that significantly impact your emotions. Here are several practical suggestions:

- Talk to yourself (as in the example above) instead of listening to yourself.
- Read a passage of Scripture about God’s care to get your thoughts back in rhythm and remind yourself of pertinent truths.
- Listen or sing along with a song that has a slow melody and encouraging lyrics.
- Take deep breaths and focus on the sound of your breathing and the sensation of the cool air coming into your body.

3. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Consider this exercise as you do it, then we’ll explain it. Flex the muscles in your hands making a fist as you slowly count to ten (also impacts pace of thinking). Feel the slight burning sensation as lactic acid builds in your muscles. Release the grip. Now do the same with your forearms; then biceps then shoulders.

As you do this, you are focusing your attention away from your hyper-arousal habits and countering the effects of stress in your body. The buildup of lactic acid in your muscles absorbs the free radicals that stress creates and causes us to feel tight after a time of prolonged stress.

As you do this with each muscle group from your hands to your feet, you are reclaiming your body from the effects of anxiety while willfully focusing your attention on what you choose. The physical exercise itself is actually much less impactful than the emotional impact it can have.

At this point it would be easy to just “run away” from the experience of anxiety; grateful to have escaped its grips. But this would leave us with a powerless-fearful disposition towards the experience of hyper-arousal. Consider the following alternative – have another conversation with your emotions (personifying is a way to make emotions more tangible and less ghostly).

To Anxiety: "Thank again how you have served me and are available to protect me still when a situation warrants. But you are being over-protective; like a big brother who won't allow his younger sibling to grow up. I am stronger now. This doesn't mean I'll never need you. There will be situations when your presence is needed. But I will be calling on you less and less now. This is a good thing for me. Thank you, again, for how you've tried to protect me in hard times, but I look forward to seeing less of you (smiling with sincere appreciation and strength)."

Will this dialogue change everything? No. Can it help you not vilify the experience of anxiety? Yes. Can it help you change your relationship with an over-active emotion? Yes.

Read Psalm 42 and 43. Both of these psalms contain the kind of awkward internal dialogue that has been discussed above. In each, the psalmist is "taking his soul to task." Notice it is not a self-scathing psalm. The psalmist is confused by his emotions, but is free to be confused about them in God's presence and he searches for hope and relief. You might consider writing your own version of Psalm 42 and 43 to capture your experience as part of what you use to slow the pace of your thinking and combat the habits of hyper vigilance.

Responding Better to Post-Traumatic Agitation

Having your flight-fight response perpetually "on" makes it much easier to be agitated by relatively small life disruptions. Having experienced something traumatic can make it difficult to be compassionate to the relatively smaller things about which people around you are likely to complain. These factors combine to make anger, or it's more passive counterpart of cynicism, a common post-traumatic struggle.

Responding proportionally to these agitants is an important part of reclaiming your emotional world. Often fear and numbness get more attention when it comes to emotional disruption that occurs after a traumatic experience. But controlling the altered experience of agitation is also an important part of re-engaging life and relationships in a healthy way.

It is important to view this part of the struggle as being liberated. Countering fear and numbness feels "more free" but countering agitation often feels "less free" or condemned. Curtailing our agitation will involve saying less or saying things less passionately than feels natural. It can feel less authentic; like you are losing your voice again. But this is not the case.

Think of it this way: countering post-traumatic agitation is what allows you to express uncertainty as uncertainty instead of uncertainty as anger. Anger is usually a secondary emotion when it is the result of a post-traumatic response.

- A primary emotion is how we feel about a particular situation.
- A secondary emotion is how we feel about how we feel about a particular situation.

Consider a classic example. A parent sees their child running towards the street. Their primary emotion is fear; they are concerned for their child's safety. Their secondary emotion is anger; they are upset their child's safety is in danger. The volume of their voice and sharpness of their voice makes it most natural for their child to interpret their response as anger. The follow up conversation is inevitably about trying to explain why the parent was scared instead of angry and why the child should show more caution.

After a trauma, uncertainty is a threatening experience that is hard to gauge because not knowing what to do was very dangerous during the trauma. Our response to feeling uncertain is self-protective. The result can be a tone of anger which provides a surge of strength and defiance that would give us the best opportunity to extinguish the uncertainty.

But do you notice how central allowing this post-traumatic agitation to remain makes your traumatic experience to your day-to-day life? This is what makes growing in self-control an effort towards freedom for you and not just an effort at "being nicer" for everyone else.

The approach to this struggle can be very similar to your approach to hyper-vigilance symptoms. Consider these steps:

- First, you seek to be aware of this response as it is happening.
- Second, based on your new understanding of the experience, you resist a sense of shame that would cause you to respond out of a negative motivation.
- Third, you take steps to calm your physical reaction to agitation.
- Fourth, you change your relationship to the anger; expressing gratitude for when it has served you well, but excusing it from being your emotion of choice in this moment.

Read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Okay, you may only skim over these books or reflect on the life of Jesus for this devotion. But one of the reasons we marvel at Jesus was his emotional control. One way to articulate what Jesus was doing is that he never allowed secondary emotions (his response to being in a difficult situation) overtake his primary emotions (his primary agenda or goal for influence in those difficult situations). Identify several events in Jesus’ life that correlate with your struggle with post-traumatic agitation. Place yourself in Jesus’ sandals. Allow yourself to get “rialed up” as you read. Read the passage again and use the steps above to lessen the post-traumatic agitation as you visualize yourself responding as Jesus did.

Countering Intrusive Symptoms

An important part of “reclaiming” your own mind is enhancing your ability to offset the intrusive symptoms of trauma. We want to get to the place where we can pick up and put down our thoughts at our own volition. We want our relationship to be like one we might share with a pesky house cat (written by a “dog person”); the cat may jump in our lap throughout the day, but if it is a time that we do not wish to entertain the cat, we want to be able to put it down and continue our day.

Decreasing the Power of Triggers

The big idea of countering intrusive symptoms is the ability to accurately gauge and respond to a troubling event. Intrusive symptoms gain their force by exaggerating (trigger events and panic attacks) or falsely generating (flash backs) the degree of threat in an unpleasant circumstance. In this section, we will look at preventing the “amping up” of intrusive symptoms. In the next section, we will consider how to “amp down” intrusive symptoms once they have surged.

“Not all danger is overwhelming; not all fear is terror (p. 199).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Initial measures on decreasing the influence of triggers require placing intentional thought between the disturbance and our reaction. Admittedly, this is easier said than done, but it is both possible and worth the effort.

The first two major elements you should have already established in the earlier parts of this study: (1) establishing a sense of safety so that the triggering event is not magnified by a pervasive sense of danger, and (2) disempower the memory of the trauma through stripping of its false messages and grieving losses related to it so that each triggering event does not feel like the crescendo of a fatalistic story.

These areas of growth should greatly help you put intentional thought between the disturbance and your reaction. Now we want to add a four step process you can use when you encounter a triggering event. There is no magic in the steps; they are much more fire drill than incantation. They give you steps to follow towards safety when fear might seem paralyzing.

1. **Stop** – Stopping is different from “freezing.” Stopping is a choice to make life slow down when it wants to move fast. Stopping is an act of defiance against the effects of trauma. Stopping is the equivalent of stomping your foot, looking trauma in the eye, and saying, “Not this time. I’m in charge now and you don’t get to call the shots.”

On a side note, personifying your post-traumatic experience can be a way to make the experience seem less ghostly. If this type of imagery is helpful for you, be sure you’re the adult in the imagined dialogue; you are the one with the “final say” about how things will proceed.

2. **Breathe** – In this case breathing is more than a relaxation exercise; it is an indication of safety and peace. There is time to breathe. You are refusing to react on trauma’s false-rushed time table. But don’t let this defiance feed a reaction in anger. Anger is too closely associated with feeling threatened.

Imagine your trauma like an impatient child demanding to go to the park, “Right NOW!” What is the best response? Calmness. Anger gives the impression something is going to happen immediately; it is an indication the child is gaining control. Calmness says you are in control.

Taking the child tantrum imagery further, you can understand why the child wants to go to the park so badly and this gives compassion towards their immature demands. Similarly, you can understand why a trigger event wants a “code red response” and this allows you to be compassionate without acquiescing to your natural response.

This final point is more important than many people realize. If you are harsh with yourself for being stirred by triggering events, this will impede your efforts. You will feel condemned by your own conscience even when you respond wisely to triggers. Being patient with yourself is part of maintaining a sense of safety during and after the effects of a triggering event.

3. **Think** – The newly established pace of response should give you an asset you’ve not had to battle a triggering event: time to think. Your goal with this time is to assess how big of a gap exists between your real and perceived threat. Use these questions to help you make this assessment.

- How many options do I have in responding to this situation?
- Is my fear or anger rooted more in this moment or its similarity to my past trauma?
- What will my life look like in an hour if I respond well to this moment?

Our natural reaction during a traumatic trigger is to assume, “I have no options. This moment is as threatening as it feels. My foreseeable future is ruined.” When we respond based on these assumptions we compound the traumatic moment with foolish choices and the consequences seem to confirm what our initial fear foretold.

It is by stopping to think and assess a situation that we can prove our fears to be the false prophets they are. The more times we can pair wise choices with triggering events the less believable our fears will become. Our trauma-hyped fears become like the bad friend who we learn not to trust because they break their promises and following their counsel gets us in trouble.

4. **Choose** – Choice is how you express power and voice. Whether or not your choice is “the best choice,” let it be your choice and not one forced upon you by fear. Don’t hold yourself to a standard of perfection in these choices; that would be unrealistic even if you weren’t battling the effects of a trigger event.

Your standard should simply be: did I make a choice that I deemed to be wise and reasonable based on the information that was available to me in that moment? If the answer is yes, then you’re making progress. With time, once you are consistently making choices in pursuit of wisdom rather than in reaction to fear, the quality of your decision making will improve. But regaining your sense of autonomy and voice to choose is the first step.

Read II Corinthians 10:3-6. What we have discussed above is an exercise in “taking every thought captive” (v. 5), which does not just apply to theological arguments or moral dilemmas. Verse 3 describes our human tendency to react as if immaterial threats were physical threats. Satan loves to use hypothetical or traumatically-inflated threats to disrupt our lives. This is one of our enemy’s strategies for establishing a stronghold in our life. This does not mean that a trigger response is wrong. Remember, Satan would as gladly use suffering to disrupt our lives as sin, but God gives us the strength to take every thought captive both when the temptation is not to sin but also when Satan would use suffering as his means to disorder our lives.

Responding to a Flashback or Panic Attack

Flashbacks and panic attacks are more than sticky memories that are unsettling and hard to put down. They are experiences where the memory or fears associated with the memory of our trauma become more real to us than our actual surroundings. Instead of our present reality being in our cognitive-emotional foreground and the memory-emotions being in the background, this relationship is reversed.

The goal in battling a flash back or panic attack is to have our actual surroundings return to the foreground of our experience of life. Instead of being swept away in memory or emotions to such an extent that our present situation becomes inconsequential, we want to keep our roots in the here-and-now enough to withstand the memory or emotion.

Hopefully, this seems more doable than merely thinking you have to “stop the flash back or panic attack.” A strategy that only tells you what not to do is useless. One of the most effective ways to ground yourself in the here-and-now is through your five senses. Below we will talk about how to use each sense to return your present reality to the foreground of your experience when you are facing a flashback or panic attack. These strategies can also be effective if you feel yourself beginning to dissociate.

- **Sight** – Go to a mirror and make eye contact with yourself. Allowing your eyes to dart around the room seeking a threat loosens your visual anchor to the present. “Own” what you do with your eyes. As you look at yourself, see a competent adult; this is particularly helpful for those who experienced trauma as a child and return to feeling child-like during their experience of a flashback or panic attack

Keep your eyes open. The darkness of having your eyes closed creates a blank canvass upon which your imagination can depict your memories or fears. Keeping your eyes open is a choice you can make that is a sign of courage and autonomy. It represents a new attitude which recognizes you are larger than your memories.

- **Smell** – Keep your favorite scent handy; a potpourri sack or scented candy in your pocket. Pull it out when you feel a flashback or panic attack beginning. The deep breath you take activates both the calming influence of a pleasant smell and the calming effects of cooling the nasal cavity.

Memory is more closely associated with the olfactory sense than any of the other five senses because the olfactory sense registers in the brain’s limbic system where emotion is also housed. Enhance the impact of your calming smell by having it present during activities you enjoy (i.e., favorite hobby, a warm bath, listening to calming music).

- **Touch** – What are your favorite sensations? Smooth velvet. A leathery baseball. A cool ice pack. A warm cup of coffee (probably decaf at a time like this). Keep these things readily available. But as you access them, don’t view them as an escape valve. That only exacerbates the sense of danger. Choose them as an exercise of your will about what you will give your attention to.

Another means of using touch is soothing self-touches. What do you do with your hands when you’re stressed? Wrench your neck. Ruffle-pull your hair. Scratch your skin. What if you chose soothing touches instead? Massaging your temples. Relaxing your hands and shoulders. These are ways to communicate to yourself that you are safe and are made more effective if you repeat the gospel themes from chapter six to yourself as you do them.

Pets also make for excellent soothing touch encounters. If you’re at home when you begin to experience a flashback or panic attack and have a pet, call them to you. Stroke their fur. Pay attention to how they lean into your hand or the affirming purr they give. Allow this to help keep “your safe here-and-now” in the forefront of your experience.

- **Sound** – Calming music, nature sounds, or even a white noise machine can help anchor you in your present surroundings. If you are sound sensitive, be aware of when you place yourself in high stimulation or high volume environments. These can increase your baseline stress levels without you being aware of it and leave you more susceptible to a post-traumatic reaction.

Calling a friend is an excellent use of sound as a calming mechanism. Whether you choose to talk about the pending sense of a panic attack or flashback or not, the interactive quality of a conversation is an excellent means of grounding yourself in the present. If you are willing to talk about the experience, this can be a good way to counter its messages of doom; rarely does any fear seem as great or close once we speak it out loud with a trusted friend.

- **Taste** – Whether it’s a soothing piece of sweet candy or a shockingly sour candy, you can always have a taste anchor in your pocket and there is no social awkwardness about accessing it. Panic attacks and flashbacks are foul experiences; having something pleasant tasting in your mouth can help counter the experience.

There is also something casual about having a snack. While this is not directly linked to the sense of taste, it can be part of the experience of eating which is calming. The experience of fear is also physically draining, and the boost of energy from a healthy snack helps counter this.

What do you do with these? Don’t expect to sensory bomb your next post-traumatic experience into oblivion. Recognizing these are tools and how to best use them will take some time. Be versatile in your options. Think through the various setting in which you’ve experienced panic attacks or flashbacks and select counter-triggers that fit well in each setting.

Also, become aware of the early experiences that are indicative of a pending flashback or panic attack. These anchors are most effective if you begin to use them before the intrusive symptoms have their full momentum.

Don’t expect yourself to interrupt every panic attack or flashback. If you do, then you will feel like you’ve failed when you have one of these intense experiences. A sense of failure makes us prone to give up and stop battling. Use these approaches with the mentality of war; you don’t have to win every battle to be victorious in the war. Make sure you do not surrender the momentum of the larger journey just because a single encounter with trauma went poorly.

Read passages referencing the five senses. Use an on-line Bible concordance to find passages that reference “look,” “taste,” “hear,” “feel,” “aroma,” and other sensory-related words. Sometimes we reduce the experience of our faith to a purely cognitive exercise, as if God were a set of beliefs. As you review these passages, you won’t “taste and smell God,” but you can gain an appreciation for how God intends for us to use all five senses in our knowledge and enjoyment of him. After all, it was God who chose the number of our senses and he delights when we use them to experience more of the life he intended for us.

Lessening Constrictive Symptoms

Decreasing constrictive symptoms is primarily about regaining a sense of freedom. Without a sense of freedom, our emotions either inflate (hyper-arousal) or deflate (constriction), and our willingness to trust is understandably undermined. In the early steps of this material, you worked hard to re-establish a sense of safety. Hopefully you have experienced a significant amount of relief from the efforts. In this step, you will be building on that relief to re-establish a freedom of emotion and trust that the pending sense of danger inhibited.

Beginning to Feel Again

What do you do when you turn your television on and it starts way too loud? Chances are you hit mute before you start turning down the volume. This is the equivalent of what happens to emotions after a traumatic experience. Our emotions spike. They're overwhelming. We mute them to survive. But we're not sure how to turn them back on once we've adjusted the volume.

One of the problems is how much we begin to rely on control after trauma. We try to eliminate, or at least limit, the number of experiences that are not controllable-predictable. Emotions fit in that category. In order to feel again, we would have to surrender control. Our resistance to losing control becomes the lever that restricts our emotions.

The problem with talking about emotions and control is that we put them together and hear, “He's saying I should be emotionally out of control. No thanks.” That is not what is being said. But you will have to surrender some control in order to experience healthy emotions again. Since we can't willfully change-choose our emotions, what might this look like?

- Listen to your favorite song and allow yourself to become unaware of your surroundings as you listen.
- Say “yes” to the invitation of a trusted friend and engage the activity without trying to predict the outcome.
- Listen to something you find funny and laugh out loud without concern for who hears you.
- Share something that is meaningful to you with a trusted friend without worrying whether they agree.
- Engage a new interest you've never tried without being concerned about how well you do.

These actions represent the opposite of the kind of choices we make in order to maintain a sense of control, and, thereby, restrict our emotions. You'll notice that freedom is about what you're not focused on rather than what you are. This is because emotional freedom is about giving yourself to a moment more than a technique you can master.

With that in mind, what are the best opportunities you can think of to express emotional freedom?

Your examples will be better than any of the ones listed above. They fit your life better. What is important is that you see that you don't “do the free expression of emotion,” but you “do the things that are important to you without a preoccupation for how you perform or what people think.” As you do this with greater freedom and ease, emotions happen. Don't focus on feeling particular emotions. Focus on freeing yourself from the patterns of thought that stifle emotions.

Don't label emotions as “good” or “bad” but try to gauge how well they fit the situation. Unless we do this, “pleasant” begins to mean “good” and “unpleasant” means “bad.” Mistaking unpleasant for bad is a great way to constrict your emotions. After a trauma you will feel many unpleasant emotions that are situationally-appropriate.

You will also experience many that are historically-valid but not situationally appropriate; that is, they make sense in light of the past, but not the present. These are the emotions you need to cleanse of the destructive suffering story elements (step 4) and grieve the losses associated with them (step 5); which allows you to process these emotions without having to shut down in order to avoid unpleasant emotions.

Read Psalm 77. Notice how the psalmist navigates unpleasant emotions. Instead of being ashamed that “my soul refuses to be comforted” (v. 2), he voices this as a prayer to God. He is even honest to God that, at first, this prayer is ineffective – “when I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit fails” (v. 3). Not being caught up in what he “should feel” allowed the psalmist to be honest about what he “did feel” which allowed God to begin to restore his affections to health. Trust that God is strong and faithful enough to walk with you through a similar emotional journey.

Refuting Shame

Shame is a word with many definitions. This speaks to how multi-faceted the experience can be. In this section we will define shame as "feeling worthy of rejection because of one's experience of suffering." If we were talking about sin, this would be an accurate statement. Sin does merit separation and requires Jesus' blood to wash away its stain. Shame treats the distress of suffering like the stain of sin and cannot find a remedy.

Nothing about suffering causes God to judge or condemn you. God's response to your suffering is to offer comfort, not forgiveness. When we place our experience of suffering in the wrong moral category, we try to apply remedies (i.e., asking forgiveness, having more faith, increasing our spiritual disciplines, etc...) which leave us arguing with God (i.e., "How much more do You want from me?") instead of resting in God's compassion (i.e., "I am glad You are safe enough for me to hurt with.").

In his book *Mending the Soul*, Steven Tracy offers five strategies for overcoming shame (p. 87-91; bold text only). While these strategies are worded to address suffering in the form of abuse, the principles are transferable to other forms of suffering.

1. **Clarify Ownership:** There is guilt associated with suffering. You do not own it. You may own some guilt for how you responded. That is very different from owning the guilt for the suffering. Imagine the guilt for your suffering as a pile of dirty-stinky laundry. Whose is it? Refuse to do their laundry. Also, refuse to become bitter; that is another way of losing control. Emotionally set the laundry in the room of the person responsible and entrust what happens to that laundry to be handled between them and God.
2. **Accept the Judge's Verdict:** In the experience of suffering, God declares you innocent. Hear God say both, "Not guilty," and "Much loved." His resulting command is not, "Repent and believe," but "Come near and be comforted." His call is not "Believe more," but "Trust." These are not words too-good-to-be-true. They are not if-only dreams. These are the pronouncements of the sovereign God who has the final say in all matters.

Read Hebrews 2:14-18. See the Judge come down from behind the bench. See "a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3) who put on flesh – allowing himself to experience pain – so that he could compassionately speak to your suffering as an insider, not merely make judicial pronouncements as a detached bystander. Hear the words of your loving Judge spoken by someone who understands the weight and significance of every syllable. Allow these realities to make his words more believable than your own doubts, fears, and shame.

3. **Prayerfully Hand Shame Back to the Abuser:** It is not vindictive to refuse to accept responsibility for pain you did not cause. Apart from owning and repenting of their sin, someone who inflicts suffering on another bears the weight of their sin. Handing shame back to them (refusing to accept the blame and live as if it's your fault) can be an act of love clarifying their need to repent. Even if the source of your suffering is a non-person, leaving the shame in the hands of Satan – the author of evil in our world – leaves your hands open to receive God's comfort and mercy.

"One of the most empowering things an abuse survivor can do is to prayerfully hand shame back to his or her abuser. Theologians rarely discuss this concept, but it's a frequent biblical theme. Biblical writers often asked God to shame their abusive enemies. Most likely, this meant asking God to do two things: (1) cause the abuser to be overwhelmed with shame for his or her sin so that they would repent, and (2) bring utter destruction on the abuser if he or she didn't repent (p. 89)... For survivors of abuse, the most damaging definitions of forgiveness are those that conflate forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation and eliminate the possibility of negative consequences for the offender (p. 181-182)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

4. **Choose to Reject:** You cannot stop someone from blame-shifting. Even in cultures where "freedom of speech" is not a guiding principle of government, we cannot control how others interpret events. You can reject their interpretation. Oddly, the best way to do this is not necessarily rejecting them as a person; which usually leads to a verbal altercation. You can simply reject their message. Whether you view them as naïve, misinformed, blinded by sin, or intentionally manipulative, you do not have to counter someone who communicates shame in order to be free from their message. Not believing-embracing a destructive message is a way to disempower it even when you cannot (or is it wise not to try to) dissuade the messenger.
5. **Experience Authentic Community:** The more ungodly messages or messengers you have in your life the more godly messages and messengers you need in your life. Make sure this ratio is in your favor. The kind of community you've been developing over the course of this study should help. If you still feel imbalanced-to-the-negative talk with the person(s) with whom you've been going through this study about how to expand the number of people who know you well enough that they become part of your healthy, authentic community.

"Dealing with the trauma in the context of a safe connection allows the survivor, often for the first time in her life, to be *herself* in relationship to another (p. 128)." Diane Langberg in *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

Read Psalm 31:14-22. If messages of shame are frequent for you, memorize this passage as something you can pray as often as you need. Realize this is a psalm, because God knew we would face the experience of shame frequently in a broken world and he wanted us to have words to bring to him when our experience of shame was thick. Notice how the psalmist goes back and forth between trusting God and refuting the voices of shame. Allow your prayers to follow this pattern so that, in refuting the voices of shame, you do not get locked down in those messages trying to argue with them.

Forgiveness and Trust

When trauma was inflicted by a person forgiveness becomes part of the process of learning to trust again; not necessarily trusting the perpetrator of the trauma, but trusting anyone. This is a delicate subject and one that should not be rushed. Sometimes when this subject is discussed it can begin to feel like God cares more about whether you forgive than that you were hurt. That is not the case. If you are not ready for this material, feel free to wait until its benefits become clear to you.

The subject of forgiveness begs the question of confronting the person who inflicted trauma upon you. When should this done? How should this be done? How do I know if I'm "ready"? In her book *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* Diane Langberg lays out four principles that should govern a confrontation (p. 168-177; bold text only).

1. **Every Confrontation Should Be Governed by a Purpose:** Confrontation is not a necessary step for recovery from trauma. Forgiveness does not require a personal interaction. There are two common purposes for a confrontation that are unhealthy. First, some people think confrontation will bring neat closure. If your purpose requires a cooperative response to the confrontation it is likely too idealistic to have a positive outcome. Second, some people think confrontation will be punitive and bring a sense of justice. Even if the other person does "face their sin," a revenge motif is rarely as satisfying in reality as it is in our imagination. Here are several types of purposes that would be healthy:
 - "I want to regain my voice and I believe having this conversation is an important step in that process."
 - "I am going to make changes in my life that would only make sense in light of what happened. I don't want these changes to come across as controlling or weird on my part, so enough of what you did will be disclosed to the relevant people so that these actions make sense. I am not asking permission, but making you aware. I want to make this decision in openness and not secrecy, because I refuse to live with any more forced secrets."
 - "I want to give you the opportunity to repent as an indication your actions no longer overpower me. In the past, your non-repentance would have been a threat to my emotional well-being. I am stronger now. I want you to know I am entrusting you to God for either forgiveness based on repentance or punishment."

It is important that your goals for the confrontation not be dependent upon a positive response from the person who inflicted the trauma. Otherwise, you are setting yourself up to feel powerless in their presence again, and this can cause a significant setback. Notice how each of the sample purposes above can be accomplished even if the individual is still denying or shifting blame for what they did.

2. **Every Confrontation Should Be Done with Care:** Confrontation is better done a month too late than a month too soon. Confrontation should not be done until the progress made in the latter stages of recovery (reconnecting with life and relationships) has had time to solidify. In addition to assessing your personal readiness, attention should be given to whether others who may be affected by the confrontation (i.e., family members, co-workers, etc...) are in a position to respond well. Not accounting for the possibility of isolation based upon the factors can create a likelihood of a negative social response; which is another reason confrontations can become experiences that result in more regress than progress in the recovery process.
3. **Every Confrontation Requires Maturity:** Abusive people and abusive contexts are not known for mature responses when their abuse is exposed. The factors that would prevent the confrontation from spiraling into immaturity (i.e., anger, theatrics, self-pity remorse, etc...) will need to be established by you – the one doing the confronting. Consider these guidelines to help you in this process.
 - Script what you want to say; whether you choose to read it or not.
 - Decide in advance what next interactions you are or are not willing to accept.
 - Decide who you want to be present for the confrontation.

- Have a set response for both a denial and a counter-attack response.
 - Have a set response for the possibility you are frequently interrupted.
 - Decide on a time with a clear end and script your statement to fit the duration of time you are willing to give.
 - Decide on a place with a clear exit. In a context you're used to feeling powerless, don't allow yourself to feel trapped.
 - Plan what you intend to do afterwards to process the experience and calm yourself, if needed.
4. **Every Confrontation Must Be Governed by Truth:** You are not opening a debate in which "both sides will be heard." Your primary goal is not even to condemn (i.e., say "What you did was wrong") but to expose (i.e., "I am no longer willing to live as if this didn't happen"). Exposing trauma is sufficient to reveal its wrongness. You are offering the other person an opportunity to live in the light of truth and declaring your unwillingness to live in the darkness of lies any longer. If that much is accomplished, then the confrontation will have accomplished what can be reasonably expected from it for you and have the opportunity to be redemptive for the other person.

Whether it is wise or there is the opportunity to confront, forgiveness is an important step in regaining emotional freedom from the experience of trauma. In *Mending the Soul*, Steven Tracy offers five steps in the wise practice of forgiveness after abuse (p. 190-194; bold text only).

1. **Clarify the Offense and the Resultant Negative Emotions:** Forgiveness is an emotionally honest practice. There is no "pretending everything is okay" in forgiveness. The first step in forgiveness is to name the offense immoral (not just a mistake or lapse in judgment) and, thereby, declare that it requires forgiving (not just excusing). It is important that forgiving not become an exercise in silencing your own voice. Put in to words what you are forgiving and the impact it had on you before taking the next step.
2. **Determine Appropriate Boundaries to Check Evil and Stimulate Repentance:** Forgiveness is a socially wise practice. Forgiveness after someone has inflicted a trauma upon you does not require giving them a "full security clearance" back to your heart and life. Determine what is wise for the future of the relationship; if a relationship still exists. Willingness to accept these parameters without resistance or self-pity is an indicator whether this individual has changed enough to be considered safe.

"A second element of boundary setting will in many cases be the first aspect of actual forgiving. Here the boundaries are set not only to protect the victim but also to check the offender's evil and, in so doing, to stimulate repentance... The erecting boundaries to prevent abuse also serves to thwart, or check, their evil, giving them the 'gift of defeat' that can be used by God to stimulate their repentance (p. 192)." Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*
3. **Deliberately Let Go of the Right to Hurt an Abuser for the Hurt He or She Has Inflicted:** Forgiveness is an emotionally liberating experience. This is what you have been wanting, a way to let go of the hurt and anger. In this step you are entrusting this individual to God for justice. Picture yourself handing over the case file to God and saying, "I have tried to prosecute this case. It was eating me alive. I trust you to handle it with a redemptive justice. I am returning jurisdiction for this situation to you."
4. **Reevaluate the Abuser and Discover His or Her Humanity:** Forgiveness is a soberly humanizing experience. Most abusers have been abused or traumatized in some manner. This doesn't reduce their responsibility for what they did at all. It does mean they're a more three dimensional person than we tend to see them as through the lens of our pain. We want them to be a monster, so we do not have to share humanity with them. We want them to be completely "other." You do not have to experience sympathy, but forgiveness (with time) should allow you to begin to view this individual with a history that shaped them in ways that made it more understandable why they traumatized another.
5. **Extend Appropriate Grace:** Forgiveness is a personally costly experience. You are giving up something. It would be nice if all forgiveness cost us was our bitterness. This grace should not take you outside the parameters you set in step two in this process of forgiveness. With time, it should mean that you would want for this person to be made whole by God's grace; that they would no longer embrace the lies of Satan that made their actions seem plausible to them. You don't need to think this often, only as often as they come to mind, so that the memory of them loses the "stickiness of bitterness."

Conclusion

What should you do with all this material? At first, probably nothing. Don't move fast. That reinforces the sense of pervasive danger that we're trying to offset. Mark the things that you think hold the most promise to be helpful for your situation. Then rest. Allow your soul to settle before you start to "do" anything.

As you begin to introduce some of these strategies to offset the impact of your suffering, consider beginning with an approach from the area in which you are still experiencing the most life disruptions: hyper-arousal, intrusion, or constriction. Give yourself permission to practice with each approach. Don't pressure yourself to "make it work." Just get used to approaching the difficult moments differently.

In approaching the content of this step this way you are caring for yourself in a way that mirrors God's care for you. You are caring for yourself as a person instead of a performer. Get used to that. Enjoy it. Rest in it. As you experiment with these approaches to offset the impact of your trauma, visualize God smiling. Maybe not the smile of a parent watching their child take their first steps, but the smile of a parent watching their grown child take their first steps after a major accident that left them temporarily immobilized.

There is relief and joy in his smile, but not a sense that you are small and weak. You are an adult in this image, but still loved like a child. You are capable, but have been through a season where your ability was restricted. You are coming back to full strength. But God's joy is much more in your new found freedom than in any of the activities you may choose to do with that freedom.

Encouragement Focus (IDENTIFY GOALS):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- Which area of struggle is most difficult for you at this time: hyper-arousal, intrusion, or constriction?
- Which approach(es) are you planning to try first and how can I encourage you in this?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 8

“The Anti-Climactic of the Post-Traumatic”

PERSEVERE in the new life and identity to which God has called me.

“Some of the effects of my trauma remain [describe] but it defines me less and less.

But I am also experiencing more of what God has for me.

I never knew life could include [list of experiences] again.

I see now that God was not withholding these things from me, nor were they forfeited.

I am learning to enjoy them without guilt, fear, or guardedness.

I have come to realize that ‘healthy’ means more than the absence of pain or sorrow.

I am learning to trust and enjoy God in the rise and fall of my circumstances.”

Memorize: Romans 5:3-5 (ESV), “More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through this Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Rejoice” – If you read the passage carefully, you’ll see we rejoice in the fruit of suffering; not the trauma, not the pain.
- “Endurance... character... hope” – In these words you can likely see the journey you have been on in this study.
- “Shame” – God is faithful not only to redeem the suffering but remove the shame associated with suffering.
- “God’s love... poured” – You may fill empty many times on this journey, but remember God’s supply is constant.
- “Holy Spirit” – This seal (2 Cor. 1:22) of God’s permanent covenant cannot be broken, even by the effects of trauma.

Teaching Notes

“Victims often must *experience* love before they can *embrace* love and begin to trust others (p. 197).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“Therefore, I seek counseling as a concession—not immoral, but tragic. For counseling often provides the kind of community where change can occur, whereas such community was meant to be provided in the context of normal and daily intimate and prophetic conversation that is mutual, equal, and free (p. 38).” Dan Allender in *Wounded Heart*

“The resolution is never complete, it is often sufficient for the survivor to turn her attention from the tasks of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life. The best indices of resolution are the survivor’s restored capacity to take pleasure in her life and to engage fully in relationships with others. She becomes more interested in the present and the future than in the past, more apt to approach the world with praise and awe than with fear (p. 212).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“Relational intimacy is built on emotional connection and risk taking (p. 115).” Steven R. Tracy in *Mending the Soul*

“[Jesus] shields the sufferer herself so that the wrongdoing can neither penetrate to the core of her identity nor determine her possibilities (p. 118).” Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory*

Embedded Study

New and normal are words that do not belong together. But that is precisely what step eight is all about, establishing a new normal. In steps 2-4, you looked at the things that disrupted your old normal. In step 5, you grieved the loss of your old normal. In steps 6-7, you began to piece together a new, healthy normal. Now, in step 8, you will begin to rest in that new normal and allow it to solidify.

Unfortunately, the post-traumatic responses of intrusion, constriction, hyper-arousal, shame, and fragmentation created a way of life that made it easy for us to wonder if “normal” could ever be good again. Hopefully that skepticism is beginning to fade by the time you’ve reached this point in your journey.

Realize, the phrase “new normal” seems to imply more intentionality than it actually requires. You do not need a spreadsheet with seven columns and twenty-four rows to itemize and color-code. As you live wisely, a new-healthy normal will happen. This chapter will be devoted to identifying the defining marks of this new normal so you can be comforted as this occurs.

The chapter will also include two other sections. First, we will look at how this new normal assimilates into your life story. This will be a place for you to summarize what you learned and how you have grown over the course of this study. You will seek to combine the narrative you built in steps four through six with the practices you implemented in steps seven.

Second, guidance will be provided to help you think through how to prepare to transition from your current formal helping relationship (i.e., support group, counseling relationship, or mentor relationship) into general small group ministry of your church for continued encouragement and growth. You are about to enter a new season of transition: from healing to living.

Marks of a New Normal

The marks below are not portraits of what your new normal will look like. Each life is unique, so trying to create a list that would capture the new normal of every person would be impossible. Rather, the marks below capture the emotional, relational, and spiritual development that should be occurring as a healthy new normal emerges.

Many of these points are modified and adapted from H. Norman Wright’s book *Experiencing Grief* (bold text only, pages 79-80). At this stage in the process, re-engaging life after a trauma and processing grief are similar. Both involve beginning a new season of life after an event that significantly impacted your “life narrative.”

As you read through this list, do not view it as a to-do list. That would be the equivalent of a teenager reading about puberty as something he/she must accomplish. As you continue to live wisely, you will find these traits developing in your life.

Begin by marking with an asterisk (*) those items that you have already seen occurring during your journey. Allow this to encourage you about God’s faithfulness and give you confidence that those things that have not yet emerged will do so. Pray for those things that have not yet emerged and, each time one of these qualities does emerge, celebrate it as another fulfillment of God’s promise (Philippians 1:6).

1. **Treasuring the Lessons You’ve Learned from Your Post-Traumatic Journey:** Pain is excellent at distracting us from things of value. You do not have to say that the lessons you learned are the “reason” God allowed you to experience trauma in order to see the value in what God has done on the journey. Doubtless you are stronger in many ways; your spiritual-emotional endurance muscles have been stretched. How could you not be a more compassionate person towards those whose life-struggles are hard to articulate, see, or overcome? You’ve learned a great deal about yourself and what it means to have faith in hard seasons of life.

Read James 1:2-4. Your experience of trauma qualifies as what James calls “various trials” (v. 2). How do we count it joy? Not by volunteering to do it again, but by giving the lessons we’ve learned as much emotional weight as the trial we endured. One does not have to be minimized to value the other. The lessons we learned and the character we developed are part, not the whole, of what God uses to bring us to the point of being “complete” (v. 4).

2. **Energy Level Returns to Normal:** For so long life felt foreign. Everything required effort, thought, and intentionality. Decisions felt overwhelming. Conversations were intimidating, superficial, or awkward. Sleep was hard, interrupted, or an escape. That is an exhausting way to live. With the establishment of a new normal you are coming out of that way of life. Rest can be rest again. Rejoice in this as an indicator of God’s faithfulness on this journey.

Read Isaiah 40:27-31. You have likely felt disregarded by God (v. 27) and this added to the exhaustion (v. 30), but you have waited faithfully for God and are experiencing His renewal (v. 31). It is after experiences like trauma that we realize

how much our energy level is a gift from God. We so often take it for granted as “ours” but even in our prime (v. 30) we can be wasted away by life without God.

3. **Decision Making Becomes Easier:** Decisions are not simply made on the basis of principles. Decisions are influenced by mood, level of hope, sense of desperation, longevity of our current perspective (i.e., immediate relief vs. long-term benefit), and other dispositional variables influenced by trauma. We can intuitively sense this impact and often become hesitant to make decisions; at least until decisions pile up and then we may become erratic-impulsive. The journey through this material should have helped you not only sort through your emotions, but your life as whole, so that decision making can become both more intentional and free.

Read Isaiah 46:3-4. It is in the reality of this passage that clear and wise decision making exists. During the experience of trauma we gain a first person experience of God’s promises, “I will carry you... I will bear... I will save (v. 4)” and realize how much this has been happening since our birth (v. 3). An abiding awareness of God’s care and guidance provides the foundation for good decision making. We no longer feel compelled to over-compensate in our striving for these things that are already ours in Christ. Further, having come to this knowledge through suffering, we know ourselves better and are able to make decisions more clearly within the passions and interests with which God created us (Psalm 37:4).

4. **Appetite and Sleep Cycle Return to Normal:** One of the more profound ways trauma impacts our lives is by creating a sense of chaos. One of the indicators the effects of trauma are abating is a return of rhythm. While you may never be (or want to be) an “organized-scheduled person,” having biological rhythms of sleep and metabolism (key influencers on the body’s energy levels) are important factors in emotional regulation. When your body knows when it will receive rest and appropriate nutritional supplies it can be much more of an ally in your recovery.

Read Psalm 4:6-8. After trauma we are the ones who asked the question of verse 6. Now we bear the testimony of verses 7 and 8. We see that enjoying a good meal and the ability to enjoy good sleep are very God-dependent blessings. We now can savor them for what they were meant to be all along. Verses 7 and 8 would be good passages to memorize and use in your prayers before meals and before bed.

5. **Able to Enjoy Time Alone:** Solitude has long been recognized as an important discipline in the life of a Christian (see Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* chapter 7, pages 96-109). After trauma being alone with one’s thoughts can be a frightening experience. At this stage in our journey, the gift of solitude is returned to us as a blessing and we are better able to treasure this gift. If you have struggled with being alone even before your traumatic experience, then consider reading Richard Foster’s chapter on solitude. It contains several pages reflecting on the benefits of solitude during a “dark night of the soul.”

Read passages about Jesus and solitude: Matthew 4:1-11, 14:13 and 23, 17:1-9, 26:36-46; Mark 1:35, 6:31; Luke 5:16, 6:12. In His full humanity, Jesus regularly sought solitude as a source of strength. How much more would we need to do the same? It is during this time of establishing a new normal that it would be wise to evaluate how healthy and balanced your practice of spiritual disciplines are. It may be a while before life is as moldable again. If you are unsure what this would look like, then either Foster’s book or Donald Whitney’s *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* would be very a useful read.

6. **Begin Looking Forward to Events:** While battling the effects of trauma you had to remain tenaciously rooted in the present. Reliving the past or paralyzing thoughts about the future were strong intrusive interruptions. But an indicator that you are entering a new phase with your trauma is losing your fear of the past (as a memory experience) and gaining the ability to prepare for the future (in a non-hyper-vigilant manner). Now when you look to the future with intentionality and then believe that your choices can influence it for the better, you can do so with anticipation instead of dread or fear.

Read Philippians 3:12-16. This passage is often misapplied for trauma. Paul is not laying out a principle of forgetting the past or living in denial about painful events. In Philippians 4:9 Paul asks this church to remember how he handled his unpleasant experiences of anxiety while with them. In Philippians 4:12 Paul remembers being “brought low” and being hungry or in need. The principle is that the pain of our past should not become a mental block to pursuing the mission of our future. At this stage in the process you should begin to sense that turning of perspective within your own heart.

7. **Able to Use Your Experience to Comfort Others:** Initially, sharing the load of someone else’s trauma might have only served to magnify our own. When our post-traumatic responses are strong, we can become pain-saturated. Our goal, at that time, is to process our own experience wisely. At this stage you will experience God’s comfort in a way that begins to make the challenges of others less threatening. You can relate to their pain and have a real sense of empathy to let them know God will not allow them to drown in their sorrow. You do not have answers for all their questions—their experience likely has features yours did not—but you have a testimony about the Shepherd of their journey and what it was like for us to walk with Him on your journey.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-5. Notice the time lapse implied in this passage. God comforts us. He is our Father of mercies and God of all comfort in any affliction we face. Pause, with no time table for how long this part of the process lasts. So that we can testify to God's comfort to others in whatever affliction they face. The pause is essential to the comfort. If we think God has put us "on the clock" to get "a return on His comfort investment" in us, then we would not feel like we had much comfort to offer. Once we experience God's patience before the "so that" (v. 4) we begin to share abundantly in Christ's comfort (v. 5).

8. **Freedom to Worship Returns:** After trauma worship can feel like a charade; the epitome of hypocrisy. The joy implied in the word worship may have been constricted or absent. As the gospel story becomes the foundation for our new normal, we realize our trauma reminded of the general hopelessness of the human condition. In worship we begin to celebrate that there is hope for the emotional chasm we experienced to be closed. We realize afresh that we only experience emotional darkness as darkness because God made us to experience the full joy of his presence; we only find repelling those things that are contrary to our created design.

Read Psalm 23. This Psalm traces the journey of many in emotional turmoil from when worship is hard and painful (v. 1-4) to when it becomes a source of joy and strength again (v. 5-6). Be reminded that God put this Psalm in His Word to comfort you where you are on this journey. It is the psalmist's reflection upon his salvation (v. 5) which allows him to sing and see that God has dealt bountifully with him (v. 6). This is because it is the gospel where we see God agreeing with our reaction to trauma (a product of the Fall) so much that he brought the ultimate remedy to the ravages of sin in our world.

9. **Sense of Humor Returns:** Proverbs 14:13 can be the testimony of many, "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief." We feel like trauma made our laughter hollow or "just polite." Humor is built upon irony and proportionality. Trauma tends to flatten or over-inflate the meaning of everything to the point that humor dies. But we serve a God who used joy as His motivation to conquer death (Heb. 12:2). Our God truly gets the last laugh (Psalms 2:4) and our laughter can echo His victory. Without the gospel any laughter would be a form of denial. In light of the gospel, our pain becomes what is temporary (2 Cor. 3:16-18) and our joy is eternal. The return of our sense of humor then becomes an expression of healthy faith rather than an unhealthy distraction.

Read Psalm 30:5. God does not use his victory as a reason to forbid our sorrow. God is not a temperamental, insecure king who only allows happy people in His presence. God allows us to grow—not only in character, but also in our emotions—into what He has made for us to be. We find repeatedly in Scripture that God did not become impatient with our post-traumatic responses just because He conquered sin and death.

10. **New Relationships are Built:** It is hard to build new relationships while you're in the thick of the battle with trauma. Your choices do not seem fair: (a) be honest and allow your emotions to be at the forefront of your friendship, or (b) be fake and allow the relationship to build in a way that seems disingenuous. However, at this stage, you should begin to feel like you are in control enough that two things can happen: (1) you are emotionally free enough to show genuine interest in others without it being a form of escape, and (2) you have a sense of who you are that is separate enough from your experience of trauma that these experiences can be introduced into the relationship when it is natural and allows for appropriate encouragement-support.

Read Proverbs 27:9. This proverb connects new friendships with the presence of joy. It also connects the sweetness of friendship with "earnest counsel." This is the balance you should be seeing in your new relationships. The relationships are sparked by mutual interests that create a set of connection. But these relationships are also vulnerable enough that each of you are able to speak into the other's areas of struggle. Hopefully the authenticity you learned walking through this material with a mentor or counselor provided an example of how good these kinds of relationships can be.

11. **Experience Peace Even During an "Emotional Bump":** Often the near-panic that comes with a traumatic reaction is strongly correlated with the impatient realization that the journey isn't over yet or fear that we are "going back there (i.e., intense post-traumatic symptoms) again." One of the best indicators of progress is that ability to be unsettled and not be alarmed. "Success" is not the absence of all post-traumatic symptoms, but the ability to experience a trauma-related disruption at situationally appropriate levels without getting stuck. Your ability to not feel threatened by these responses is an important part of that.

Read Philippians 4:12. Notice that Paul says he knows how to be "brought low." It almost sounds as if he is bragging about this ability because it was part of the "secret of contentment" (v. 11) and relying on God's strength in all things (v. 13). Paul's experiences of being brought low were intense (II Cor. 11:23-12:10). Doubtless hardships triggered the intensity of these past experiences for Paul. But he seems to be saying "having seen God's faithfulness in the past experience of being

‘brought low’ gives me confidence in God’s future faithfulness when I am brought low. I will use what Satan meant for evil to remind myself of God’s unfailing presence.”

12. Appreciate Your Growth Because of Trauma: You did not just learn (point one) and become better equipped to serve others (point seven). You’ve grown (point twelve). You’re not just an emotionally smarter person with more helping strategies in your toolbox. You’re a more mature person. Having a skill is different from having maturity. Maturity transcends skills. Maturity allows the development of new, situationally-effective skills for yet-to-be-experienced circumstances. This is what God has done in your life. God’s work of maturity is one of the things that should give you comfort about the future.

Read Job 42:1-6. At the end of the book, Job does not know “why.” Yet he can see that God is good and has been good to him in spite of Job’s great losses. Verse 5 summarizes Job’s journey well. Job wanted answers he could hear with his ear and make sense of his suffering. Job got to see the character and redemption of God and received a peace that passes understanding (Phil. 4:7). At this stage in our recovery from trauma we may not have answers to all the questions we wanted. Job didn’t either. But we will have come to the place where the answers we do have – an awareness of who God is and his faithfulness to us – are sufficient to allow us to live with hope. Adults aren’t more mature than kids because they have all the answers, but because they have the ability to assess those things that are most important and live accordingly.

Writing Your New Narrative

At this point in your journey, with the new normal settling in, you are at a place to see your story come together to a single, meaningful narrative again. This does not mean deciphering the “reason” for your trauma, but to understand the pieces of your life – including your emotional struggle – as parts of one larger, redemptive story.

Return to the five questions you examined in chapter 6. Use the chart below to reflect on how the larger narrative in which you process your trauma has changed. In the left column summarize how you would have answered each question before this study. You will likely complete the entirety of the left column before reflecting on how you are approaching each question now; which is what you put in the right column. This should provide you with a better sense for how your larger life-narrative has changed.

If there are particular truths, experiences, or practices that have been most helpful to reinforce the kind of narrative change represented in each question also record those. This will allow this journaling exercise to remind you not only of “what” God has taught you but “how” he has made these lessons come to life and remain sticky in your life.

Before This Study	Now
1. Who Am I Now?	
2. Who and Where Is God?	
3. Where Am I?	

4. Is Hope Worth Fear?	
5. What Am I Living For?	

Preparing for Transition

This third section of chapter eight may feel like a change of pace. That is because it no longer has trauma as its focal point. This section asks the question, “What should my life begin to look like now that it’s not focused on recovering from trauma?”

Make sure you are in a small group. Trust takes time. If you have been going through this material with a counselor or mentor, the baton of trust will soon be passed from those more formal-private relationships to more natural-authentic relationships. One-way helping relationships are not long-term healthy as your primary source of support and encouragement. This needs to be experienced in two-way friendships.

The primary location in which this occurs is small groups. The lessons (cognitive and emotional) that God has taught you in the course of this study have been enhanced, protected, and applied largely because of the relationships in which you learned them. This is why it is wise for you to begin getting plugged into a general small group if you are not already. If you need help identifying which small group would be a good fit for you, talk with your counselor, mentor, or a church pastor.

Learn accountability and encouragement on a broader scale. Walking through this material with someone else may be the first time you have experienced ongoing, Christian accountability and encouragement. Accountability is not just for life-dominating struggles. It is part of God’s definition of “healthy.” People who do not have relationships in which they are honest about their struggles, seeking accountability and encouragement are people who are becoming “unhealthy.”

As you move from a counseling or mentoring relationship focused primarily upon trauma to a general small group, you may wonder what accountability and encouragement will look like now. The seven points below are meant to guide you in the kind of relationships you are looking to form with your small group.

1. Voluntary – Accountability is not something you have; it is something you do. You must disclose in order to benefit from the relationship. Hopefully, the positive experience you have had going through this material will encourage you to remain transparent and vulnerable.
2. Trusted – The other person(s) is someone you trust, admire their character, and believe has good judgment. You are encouraged to join a small group now so that you can build this trust before graduating from your formal counseling or mentoring relationship.
3. Mutual – Relationships that are one-sided tend to be short-lived. In the small group you will hear the weaknesses and struggles of others as you share your own. You will help carry their burdens as they help carry your burdens (Gal. 6:1-2).
4. Scheduled – Accountability that is not scheduled tends to fade. This is why small groups that meet on a weekly basis are an ideal place for accountability to occur. Everyone knows when to meet and has a shared expectation for how the accountability conversations will begin.
5. Relational – We want spiritual growth to become a lifestyle not an event. This means that we invite accountability to be a part of our regular conversations, not just something that we do at a weekly meeting. It should mean that there are times when we are doing accountability and don’t realize it.

- 6. Comprehensive – Accountability that exclusively fixates on one subject tends to become repetitive and fade. It also tends to reduce “success” to trusting God in a single area of life.
- 7. Encouraging – Too often the word “accountability” carries the connotation of “sin hunt.” When that is the case, accountability is only perceived to be “working” when it is negative. However, accountability that lasts should celebrate growth in character as fervently as it works on slips in character. This means asking each other questions about discouragement in addition to questions about temptations.

Have a plan for future study. We walk forward. We drift backwards. For some time now you have been a part of an intentional, structured process. If you leave that structure without a continued plan for deepening your understanding and application of Scripture to your life struggles, you will regress. Ephesians 5:15-16 calls us to intentionality out of a recognition that time minus direction equals decay, not healing.

This entire study has been filled with devotional Bible studies. If you have not been taking the time to read the passages and reflect on the devotional thoughts / questions that accompany them, consider using those as a guide for daily Bible reading. This will be a way to reinforce what you’ve learned in this study and further solidify the biblical basis for what you’ve learned.

Another recommended resource would be the seminar “Finding Your Identity, Security, and Confidence in Christ” (www.bradhambrick.com/identity) as a tool to help you solidify your progress.

Make a formal transition plan. Write out your transition plan.

- List the things that need to be in place before you “graduate” from your formal counseling or mentoring relationship.
- List the important practices you have begun in this study that you will need to maintain. Write out what the “yellow flags” (don’t wait for the red ones) would be that you should address seriously if they appear.

Review your plan with your counselor or mentor. Get their input on what needs to be added to the plan. In consultation with them, decide what aspects from that list need to be brought into the accountability conversation with your new small group before you graduate.

Encouragement Focus (PERSEVERE):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- Which of the “new normal” characteristics have you already begun to see re-emerge?
- Which of the “new normal” characteristics would you most like me to pray would develop in your life?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

With each step, we advise you to confide at least one new element of your suffering to your encouragement partner.

- _____
- _____

Chapter 9

“Learning to Live ‘For’ Instead of ‘In Response To’ Again”

STEWARD all of my life for God’s glory.

**“God has shown me great grace; grace greater than my pain.
I am learning what it means to live out of my new identity in Christ.
That has pushed me to ask the question,
‘How can I be a conduit of God’s grace to others?’
As I have sought God, examined my life, and consulted with fellow believers,
I believe this [describe] is what it looks like for me to steward God’s grace now.”**

Memorize: I Peter 4:19 (ESV), “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” As you memorize this passage, reflect upon these key points:

- “Those who suffer” – In the capital “T” suffering of trauma or suffering’s lesser expressions, we all need this passage.
- “God’s will” – How we reconcile intense experiences of suffering and God’s will may be a mystery until we see Jesus.
- “Entrust their souls” – Life is a choice between entrusting our souls to God or seeking to protect ourselves.
- “To a faithful Creator” – If you made it to this point in the study, you have many evidences of God’s faithfulness even after the experience of trauma.
- “While doing good” – Without a returning sense of purpose-mission, suffering would drain our vitality for engaging life.

Teaching Notes

To “steward” something means to use it for God’s intended purpose. It is important to remember that what is being stewarded is the life of the group member in general, not the sin specifically.

“Having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self... The old beliefs that gave meaning to her life have been challenged; now she must find a new a sustaining faith (p. 196).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

Overstatement: “The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission (p. 207).” Judith Hermann in *Trauma and Recovery*

“PTSD is a serious and debilitating form of suffering. It can cripple a person's ability to live life, relate to others, or function with some measure of stability. But it cannot prevent you from glorifying God. It can make it more challenging and difficult, but it cannot render you incapable of loving God and others by his grace (p. 30).” Tim Lane in *PTSD*

Embedded Study

It might be easy to want this study, like this season of your life, to just be over. But this study, like your life, has at least one more chapter (and several appendices) left. When you put a great deal of effort, as you undoubtedly have, into getting past something, it can be easy to forget that there is something next. The fact that God has brought you to this point should be evidence enough that He has more in store for you and more to do through you.

In this chapter you will be doing most of the writing, because it is your life that is being stewarded for the glory of God. No one else could write this chapter but you. What you will be given is nine questions that walk you through a life assessment to determine where God wants you to serve now and where He may want to prepare you to serve in the future.

Read Luke 11:24-26. This is a terrifying warning about comforting suffering when that comfort does not result in serving God's purposes with your life. Comfort alone does not satisfy the human heart. In the absence of mission, life becomes purposeless. This lack of purpose is often experienced as a form of depression. When depression sets in after we have done all we know to do in processing a trauma, then we truly begin to believe that there is no hope. If we lose hope, then the last state truly is worse than the first.

Read Ephesians 2:8-10. In this study we have traveled through the Gospel (v. 8-9) to good works (v. 10). The nine steps are merely the Gospel in slow motion. These nine steps show us God's general pattern for redeeming and restoring our suffering. We are not exiting the Gospel in order to do good works, but cultivating the fruit of the Gospel. Paul says that there are "good works" that "God prepared" for every believer and that these should define our daily lives ("that we should walk in them" v. 10). There are answers to the questions you will be asked next. You have the confidence that comes from the promises of Scripture that God has a design for your life and wants you to know what it is.

As you read through and answer the next nine questions, remember God's patience and timing. There will be some aspects of God's design that you can engage in immediately. But there may also be ways you want to serve God that will require you to be more mature or be equipped before you are prepared to fulfill them. The main thing is to begin to have a vision for life that involves being God's servant and actively engaging that vision where you are currently equipped.

I. Am I willing to commit my life to whatever God asks of me? This is a "do not pass go" question. If your answer is "no," it will bias the answers you give to each subsequent question. Do not get lost in guilt or pretend that it is "yes." Rather, identify the obstacle. What aspect of your suffering story (chapter 4) makes this sacrifice seem too risky?

Are there specific things you believe God is asking of you? Be sure to record your thoughts on this question before reflecting on the subsequent questions.

2. What roles has God placed me in? The first part of being a good steward of one’s life is to fulfill one’s primary roles with excellence. When Paul says in Ephesians 5:17 that we are to “understand what the will of the Lord is,” he goes on to describe God’s design for each of our major life roles (spouse, parent, child, and worker in 5:22-6:9).

3. What are my spiritual gifts? Stewarding your life for the glory of God involves utilizing the spiritual gifts God has given you. God gives spiritual gifts that coincide with the calling He places on each individual’s life. Read Romans 12:1-8 and I Corinthians 12:1-30. If you need further assistance discerning this, talk to a pastor about taking a spiritual gifts inventory.

4. For what group of people (age, struggle, career, ethnic, etc...) am I burdened? From God’s earliest covenant with people His intention was to bless us that we might be a blessing to others (Gen 12:2). By investing your life in those you have a burden for, it allows you to be other-minded and find joy in it.

5. What am I passionate about? At this point in the stewardship evaluation, you can begin to see Psalm 37:4 fulfilled in your life. There is a level of vulnerability involved in being passionate again, but allow yourself to express faith in God through this vulnerability and pursue the life He has for you.

6. With what talents or abilities has God blessed me? These need not be spiritual gifts. Read the amazing description of abilities God gave Bezalel and how he used those abilities to serve God (Exodus 31:1-11). Think through the skills and expertise you have accumulated in your life.

7. What are my unique life experiences? Both pleasant and unpleasant experiences should be listed. We are sometimes tempted to think that God can only use the good or spiritual experiences of our lives. God is glad to use our successes (Matt. 5:16), but God also delights in displaying His grace by transforming our suffering from flaming darts of Satan meant for our destruction to bridges of ministry carrying many people to life in Christ (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

8. Where do my talents and passions match up with the needs in my church and community? We should seek to steward our lives in cooperation with our local church. God’s way of blessing and maturing those we serve is through the Body of Christ, the church. By identifying where your gifts, burdens, passions, and abilities fit within or expanding your church’s ministries, you are maximizing the impact your service can have on those you are seeking to bless and protecting yourself from discouragement through isolation.

9. How would God have me bring these things together to glorify Him? This is not a new question, but a summary question. Look back over what you have written. Talk about it with your Christian friends, family, mentor, or pastors. Dedicate a time to prayerfully ask God to give you a sense of direction. Then begin serving as a way to steward your life for God’s glory.

Encouragement Focus (STEWARD):

With each step, we will provide questions you should invite another person to ask you openly so they can know and encourage you in the process of processing your experience of trauma.

- Are there necessary changes you have omitted that would make it unwise for you to finish this study?
- Have you demonstrated a significant number of the “new normal” characteristics evidencing readiness to finish?
- How well are you caring for yourself in the ways advised in chapter one?

Appendix A

Understanding and Responding to Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary trauma is commonly referred to as "the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person." Hearing of the trauma someone you care about experienced can have the effects of trauma in your own life. This is part of the sacrifice of love that is involved in this area of care. But it is something that is not well understood and results in a high rate of burnout amongst those who care for those who have experienced trauma.

This appendix is meant to provide guidance for those who would use this material in a counselor, mentor, group leader, or befriending role. Understanding secondary traumatic stress and countering its influence is an important part of you being a healthy, long-term asset in the life of those who have experienced trauma.

Begin with this realization: if you are going to provide care or counsel in the area of trauma, you will need to apply everything in this study in your own life. Usually this point is made to counter hypocrisy or a sense of superiority. While these are still valid points to make, they are not the emphasis of this appendix. Because to be exposed to trauma, even the story of trauma, is traumatic, you will face similar challenges as those for which you provide care as a result of caring.

Start by reviewing the trauma assessment tool in step two. Familiarize yourself with the kind of reactions that frequently emerge when we are exposed to trauma. Early detection is important for two reasons. First, it prevents inaccurate interpretations of these experiences (i.e., just a bad day, depressed, spiritual warfare, I'm doing something wrong, etc...). Second, it equips you to begin countering these influences before they get "that bad" in your own life.

Next, make sure your own base of care and healthy life practices are in place. Look at the suggestions from step one and identify the areas of your own life that need to be strengthened. Caring for yourself well is an important part of ensuring you are available to be an effective, healthy companion on someone else's post-traumatic journey.

Here are some general recommendations:

- Simplify life during this season. Do not add the stress of being over-scheduled to secondary traumatic stress.
- Be disciplined in your sleeping and exercise routines. Remain physically strong during a time of emotional strain.
- Stay engaged with your pleasurable interests. If you do not, then pain and suffering will dominate your world.
- Read your Bible for you. Don't lose the personal-ness of your relationship with God. You are not just God's ambassador to the person(s) you care for, you are God's child who he delights in and wants to know.
- Have a friend or counselor who cares for you. You do not have to breach confidentiality to have relationships where you talk about your needs and interests. Seasons of giving more should also involve receiving more.

Resources:

If this is an area where you anticipate being involved in ministry for an extended period of time, then it would be recommended that you read whichever of the books below best fit your context / role.

- *Compassion Fatigue: Coping With Secondary Post Traumatic Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized* by Charles Figley – This is a full book devoted to the subject of secondary traumatic stress.
- *Coping With Post Traumatic Disorder: A Guide For Families* by Cheryl A. Roberts – Families who have a loved one who suffers from PTSD also experience secondary traumatic stress. This book provides guidance for these families.
- *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* by Diane Langberg (Part 6, Chapters 23-25) – In this section of her book, Diane Langberg goes into greater detail about how counseling traumas, such as sexual abuse, affect the counselor and provides additional guidance on important aspects of self-care.

Appendix B

FIRST AID COUNSEL FOR A SUICIDAL FRIEND

Some people are concerned to bring up suicide because they do not want to plant self-destructive ideas in the mind of a despondent person. The risk of silence, however, far outweighs the risk of asking. Whenever you are speaking to an individual who sounds hopeless—one of the key predictors of suicide—always ask them directly, "Have you thought about suicide?" If the answer is *yes* or *maybe* – take it seriously. There is no need to panic, the person is speaking with you, so they want help and are presently safe. Your primary objectives in this conversation are to gain a commitment from the person not to kill him/herself, ensure that he/she has responsible accountability, and to provide hope.

Key Questions:

1. Have you considered committing suicide?
2. Do you have a plan for how you would take your life? (*Bullet A*)
3. Do you have access to the things necessary to accomplish your plan? (*Bullet B*)
4. Have you begun saying good-byes, written a fair-well letter, or give things away? (*Bullet C*)
5. What purpose would your death serve (to punish someone, relief from pain, get attention)?
6. Has a close family member or friend committed suicide? (*Bullet D*)
7. When are you going to be alone in the coming days/weeks?
8. Do you plan to use drugs/alcohol any time soon? (This heightens emotions and impairs judgment.)
9. Who in your life can serve as caring support, accountability and encouragement?
10. What obstacle would you need to overcome in order for life to be worth living?

Warning Signs/Special Considerations:

- A. A person who has a plan is much more likely to actually commit suicide than someone who is merely thinking about it, though both should be taken seriously. The lethality of their method of choice also raises the degree of action to be taken.
- B. When the person speaks of a specific means ("with the gun in my dresser drawer" or "off of the 5th Street Bridge") their threat should be treated as an absolute fact. This means calling law enforcement and ensuring 24 hour a day supervision.
- C. A more cheerful attitude is not necessarily a sign of improvement. Often after the person has finalized their plan to kill him/herself they are relieved that a decision has been made. Again the best procedure is to ask direct questions and maintain supervision.
- D. Having a close family member or friend who has committed suicide removes much of the taboo from the act. A person who has been through the process before may not be as frightened by the idea of suicide.
- E. If you have any doubt whatsoever, be sure to have the person to sign the life contract (see attached). Allow the person to hold on to your hope in the interim until they can see that there is reason to live. Let them know you care too much to let them die.

Biblical Hope/Action:

Job 3 – The Bible speaks vividly of the emotions and thoughts you are experiencing. God is not ignorant of these matters. He cares enough to give you words for these dark times (see also Psalm 44:9-26 and 88).

Psalms 23:4 – The believer can be certain of God's presence in the darkest times.

I Corinthians 10:13 – God promise give you a reason to HOPE! There is a way out of your circumstances besides suicide. God promises to give you the ability to endure this hardship.

Taking the Next Step:

Having this in your hands means you are taking an important step. You are seeking help. In order to follow through with that help you will need to call The Summit Church office at (919) 383-7100 to set up an appointment with one of our counselors. Please visit our website at www.summitredu.com/counseling and complete a copy of the "Standard Intake Forms." We look forward to partnering with you and walking alongside of you on this path of hope and healing.

Appendix C

What Do I Do Now?

A plumb line of the Summit counseling ministry is, “We don’t do events; we create resources.” That means you should be asking yourself, “What can or should I do with this information now?”

We have created a series of brief videos that answer that what-now question from several different perspectives. Each of these can be found at:

www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow
www.bradhambrick.com/ptsd

Personal Study or Small Group

Question: I’ve been to several of the Summit counseling seminars and notice there appears to be a couple of different kinds. You frequently recommend studying them as a small group or with a friend. That seems like a great idea, but since I haven’t done that before I’m not quite sure how to start something like that. Do you mind giving me guidance?

Pursue Personal Counseling

Question: After attending this seminar I realized I would like to pursue counseling to help me grow in this area. It sounded like there are several different options available. Would you mind explaining to me what those are and how I could connect with the one that best serves me need?

Leveraging My Workplace

Question: I’ve heard rumors that I’m supposed to be able to use the Summit counseling seminars to leverage my workplace for gospel influence. My first impression is that it sounds awkward and intrusive; like I’m telling people they’ve “got issues” or “need help.” But I’m also worried about putting up Christian material that might be offensive to some people who visit my workplace. But I would at least like to hear what you’ve got to say. How would this work?

As a Professional Counselor

Question: I’m a licensed counselor (LPC) and came across the Summit counseling seminars. I’m excited to see the church addressing these kinds of subjects, and I’m curious how you might see someone in my position (or a LCSW or LMFT) using the materials. I can see recommending them to my clients who are open to an overtly Christian aspect to their counseling, but it seems like there could be more uses than just counseling homework. Could you share your thoughts on how those in private practice might use these resources?

Our goal in Summit counseling is to (1) equip the church to care for one another and our community with excellence; (2) provide quality counseling services that allow our people to get involved in the lives of others with confidence – knowing additional, experienced care is available to come alongside them if needed; and (3) create ways for our members and other Christians in our community to leverage their workplace and careers for greater gospel impact in their spheres of influence.

We hope this seminar and these videos give you a vision for how this can happen and stirs a passion in you to be a part of God’s work of redeeming and restoring hurting individuals and families.