

CHAPTER 9

# CONNECT

SOAKING SESSION

*Kindness* by Chris Tomlin

*Learning How to Lose* by Shawn McDonald

*Come Like You Promised* by Jeremy Riddle



I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me.  
 He freed me from all my fears.  
 Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;  
 no shadow of shame will darken their faces.

*Psalm 34:4-5 (NLT)*

I will never forget that day several years ago in early fall. It was a Sunday morning, and I was sitting in a church service . . . but this was no ordinary church service. We had guests that day— a children’s choir from Asia. Forty children, ranging from 5 to 12 years of age, came to sing for us.

The children’s voices were heavenly, and their faces were radiant and sweet. There was nothing polished or formal about them. Unlike most choirs, they didn’t stand in proper formation, and yet there was a unique unity. Many of the children swayed and moved to the music as they joyfully sang without a hint of self-consciousness or striving. They were so free. They had no fear.

This humble choir brought me to tears. It was like Father God was saying, “Margaret, this is who you are, too! Have you forgotten yourself? You were made to be free, radiant, and unashamed.” It was an invitation to reconnect with the truth that Jesus spoke:

“Unless you turn your life around and become like a child again,  
 you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 18:2 (paraphrased)

Much to my surprise and the surprise of other congregants, the children walked through the aisles during their final song. With child-like freedom and humility, they displayed genuine love. Every child came to each of us in the congregation and stopped long enough to give us a heartfelt hug. I was completely undone. Forty children hugged me that day, and I will never be the same. Those *little* people taught me something about *big* love and how to show up in the world— just as I am.

## FREE TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

Genuine love requires the courage to walk in freedom and not fear. I realized these children did something I had been unable to fearlessly do— take the risk of showing up just as I am, free and ready to love.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul told them, “Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good” (Romans 12:9 NLT). Jesus was radically vulnerable and totally secure. He offered himself to us, but not because he needed us. He models what it’s like to be a source of pure love. There was no manipulation in his love—no strings

attached. That's why the prostitutes, pimps, and tax collectors loved him so much; he didn't need anything from them, and he didn't demand they change before he loved them.

Love without neediness; love without manipulation. That's what we long for. That's what we need. As we become more emotionally healthy, more honest about our flaws yet more secure in Christ's love and acceptance, we need people less and can love them more. We can own our feelings instead of trying to impress people, control or intimidate them, or hide from them because we're afraid.

When we feel fear, we instinctively react to perceived threats with *fight, flight, freeze, or appease*. When we *fight*, we lash out and hide behind anger, only to feel the heavy weight of regret and remorse that comes with hurting others. When we are in *flight*, we escape into isolating patterns of behavior that are self-destructive, never facing the truth that we need others more than we want to admit. We *freeze* because we've lost hope or we're overcome with fear and unwilling to make a choice. And we *appease* others to avoid any hint of conflict, but each time, we lose ourselves. We sacrifice who we truly are for the sake of counterfeit peace.

In all four fear reactions, we are hiding and distancing ourselves from love. The apostle John explained, "There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love" (1 John 4:18).

When we feel fear, we instinctively react to perceived threats with fight, flight, freeze or appease. Which of these is your knee-jerk reaction to fear? What situations trigger this reaction for you? What would it look like to change this reaction?

## UNASHAMED

In chapters four and five we examined how shame negatively affects our sense of identity. Here, we'll see how shame hinders our connections with people. While we were created to love and to be loved, shame is the most lethal virus to self-acceptance and courageous love. Shame is experienced when we feel unlovable and unworthy. The voice of shame is the biggest offender in our attempts to connect with love. Its tradecraft is to arouse doubts with two unrelenting and

merciless thoughts that it tries to implant in your mind and heart: *Who do you think you are? You're not good enough!* When the seed of shame begins to take root, it challenges our God-given identity and convinces us that at the core, we're bad, wrong, unlovable, and beyond hope. Shame is a liar.

The events that trigger shame can be simple or complex, mild or severe. People who suffer under a heavy dose of shame have very negative self-talk. Their fierce self-condemnation

(or giving up on themselves) feels completely right and justified . . . because they consider themselves to be so flawed, they can never be any better or get any relief.

Shame is related to guilt, but shame is much deeper and crushes the soul. As we consider our responses, it's important to distinguish between false guilt and true guilt.

False guilt (shame) is the product of an overactive conscience. It sees wrongs and flaws where none really exist, but the feeling of guilt can still be overwhelming. False guilt makes us believe we have to be perfect and we can never really measure up, no matter how hard we try. Beneath the raw, unrelenting emotion of false guilt is the deep fear that we're unacceptable and unwanted. The Bible calls this "worldly



The voice of shame taunts us: "Who do you think you are?" "You're not good enough!" When you feel threatened by the voice of shame, do you fight (lash out at others or yourself), attempt flight (escape into destructive or isolative patterns), freeze (lack the ability to think clearly and make decisions), or appease (give in to others' demands, lose yourself in the process, and go into hiding)?

What are some ways shame creates distance in relationships?

sorrow that leads to death" because false guilt only drives us to try harder and harder to achieve an impossibly high standard to win others' approval. If our repentance makes us feel more ashamed, more anxious, and more driven to prove we're acceptable, it's shame-based.

The other kind of guilt is very different. True guilt is based in fact, not fear. It is the product of a healthy conscience and the whisper of the Spirit of God to show us where we've missed God's best for us. The Bible states that, "godly sorrow brings repentance" (2 Corinthians 7:10 NIV). True guilt leads to the type of sorrow needed to admit our wrongs and make amends. In our Father's house there is no shame, our faces are radiant and unashamed (Psalm 34:5).

What are some ways shame creates crippling dependence?

Which of these effects have you experienced? Describe the impact.



## JANELLE'S STORY

Janelle is a very tender woman with a painful story. Riddled with shame, Janelle's sense of self suffered. She found herself stuck in unhealthy relationship after relationship.

I grew up near Chicago in a stable home with my parents and my brother. I wanted to spend my life making beautiful music, so after high school, I attended Northwestern University to play the French horn.

Like many artists and musicians, I'm a sensitive person—I feel deeply. This trait enables us to enter our art or music with all our hearts, but unfortunately, it can make us vulnerable. When I was in college, my roommate quickly became very possessive. She wanted all my time and attention, and she was jealous anytime I even talked to anyone else. If I came back to the room after the time she expected me, she got very upset.

At first, I was stunned and confused. But soon, my spirit was so crushed that I didn't have the strength to argue with her or resist her demands. I completely lost myself in this oppressive, emotionally abusive relationship. I was like a "battered wife" who was so afraid of being attacked she can't or won't stand up to the abuser. When my grandmother died, I went home for the funeral, but my roommate called me a dozen times a day until I came back. She had her hooks in me, and she wasn't going to let me get away.

The relationship lasted two years, but finally, I got away from my roommate. The damage, however, remained. I felt out of control and ashamed. To find some sense of power over my life, I developed an eating disorder, bulimia, and I began cutting myself. When I was diagnosed and entered treatment, my parents and friends wondered how I could be so depressed when I had so much going for me. They had no idea I'd lived four years emotionally enslaved. I felt totally and utterly worthless.

All my life I had always wanted to please people. That's why I had such a hard time saying "no" to my roommate. And now, as my parents saw my depression, bulimia and self-harm, I saw how anxious and upset they had become. Their unhappiness, I believed, was entirely my fault. I simply couldn't take it, so I tried to kill myself. I thought I was going to save my family from living with the burden of having a daughter and sister who was so messed up.

My life stabilized somewhat after the attempt. I got a job as a music teacher, and I met a man who worked for a music store. We fell in love. I told him about my eating disorder and cutting, and he admitted he struggled with alcohol. We promised each other we'd work on our problems so they wouldn't affect our marriage.

Our commitment didn't last long after the wedding. He drank, and I cut myself and had to be admitted to the hospital on several occasions. While I was in the hospital, he got drunk. When I wasn't cutting, I was restricting my food intake and exercising to control my weight. I was in and out of treatment; he drank to escape the chaos. The cycle seemed endless, hopeless, and brutal.

My husband was also emotionally and financially controlling. He didn't allow me to make any decisions about money or buy anything for myself. If I bought a glass of iced tea on a break at work, he flew into a rage. I was as oppressed in this relationship as I'd been with my roommate in college, but this time, we were married.

After about four years of marriage, I got some help dealing with the trauma I'd experienced in college, but my husband was severely depressed. He hated his job, and he complained incessantly

about his boss and his work. One day he found a job in Texas. I'd never lived more than an hour away from my parents' home. I also was in line for a management position where I worked. If he took the job, I'd have to find a new set of therapists, a support system, and a job. My husband saw the new job as a great opportunity. My parents and friends told me not to go.

Our move to Texas was a disaster. His new job turned out to be a terrible situation. He came home each day spewing venom about how much he despised his manager and the work demanded of him. I was starting from the ground up in a new job, so I was working for less pay. When he wasn't spouting anger about his boss, he was condemning me for spending money . . . and then he sat in front of the television until he went to bed. To him, our predicament was completely my fault.

My husband was Jekyll and Hyde. To everyone outside the walls of our apartment, he was the nicest guy they'd ever met. He was witty and funny, and people loved to be around him. But when it was just the two of us, his pent-up rage came out in vicious condemnation and obsessive control.

While we lived in Texas, my father was diagnosed with lymphoma. The doctors assured us he could look forward to many more years, but I'm a daddy's girl, so I went home to be with him for several months.

Soon after I got back to Texas, I realized my relationship with my husband was too toxic. We needed help. For the first time in our marriage, he agreed to go with me to marriage counseling. In therapy, he admitted he needed to make changes if our marriage was going to work, but he said, "I'm just not willing to make them." On New Year's Day, he asked for a divorce, and we separated.

I felt hopeless and worthless . . . like I wasn't wanted or good enough for him. In my despair and desperation, I burned myself severely and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. While I was there, my husband refused to even visit me. On the phone, he told me he planned to finalize our separation; he wanted a divorce. He

said, "I really love you, but I can't handle your problems. I can't fix you. I can't make you better. I can't be married to you any longer." I felt like a complete failure. My father had just finished chemotherapy, but even in his weakened condition, he drove to Texas to pick me up at the hospital and take me to his home.

I lived at my parents' house while my father continued treatment. His health gradually got worse, and I was shattered at the thought of losing him. I began burning my left arm again, and my eating disorder kicked into high gear. My family didn't know what to do with me. They couldn't understand how a bright, artistic, sensitive, pleasant young woman could be so miserable and self-destructive. They didn't understand the incredibly destructive power of self-hatred and shame.

My therapist told me I needed to go away to a safe place for a lengthy period of time. I researched the treatment centers that deal with eating disorders, self-harm, and trauma, and I found Timberline Knolls. It seemed like the perfect fit. My time at TK was wonderful. I felt safe, loved, and supported. I met some courageous and wonderful women, and my therapist consistently helped me identify the lies I'd believed and replace them with truth. After five weeks, my insurance company decided I was well enough to go home.

My father's health continued to deteriorate. My mother was working, so I took Dad to his doctor's appointments and treatment. After a few months, my mental health was deteriorating, too. I wasn't eating well, I wasn't sleeping, and I was harming myself again. It was so hard to see my father slip away. He was my best buddy and my biggest advocate. Both of us were quiet, reflective, sensitive, and shy. At family gatherings, others laughed with each other and told stories, but Dad and I found a quiet place so we could be together.

We knew the upcoming Christmas was going to be our last one with him. He died near the end of January. After the funeral, I knew I was in big trouble. My therapist at TK pulled some strings to get me back in, and only about a week after my father died, I went



back to Timberline Knolls. I had to use family funds to be there, and my brother was furious. He accused me of squandering the family's money. He was sure it was "all in my head," and I was just taking advantage of our parents. My mother told me she thought I should be in jail because that was the only place where I could be safe from hurting myself.

I felt utterly alone—except for the love and support I received from my therapist and the staff at TK. I was still tempted to hurt myself. One day, I told my therapist I was going to go into the bathroom and burn my arm. With all the love in the world, she looked at me and said, "Go ahead. Just know that God, your dad and I will all be watching." I didn't think I deserved anyone's affection and attention, and she assured me that God and two people were loving and watching me. Her love and strength was incredibly powerful. It still is.

I knew some people who believed God loved them, but I wanted God to hate me. Since I hated myself, it was the only reasonable response God could have toward me! I didn't want God to love me . . . at least, that's what I told myself.

After a year after my father died, I was doing better. I was thinking more clearly, I had a good job, and I wasn't hurting myself any more. My vibrant, confident mother called to tell me she had been diagnosed with leukemia. Thankfully, I was strong enough to be there for her when she needed me. I became my mom's primary caregiver, and our roles were reversed: when she was weak, I gave her hope and strength.

Chemo didn't work on her type of leukemia. She went into the hospital for a stem cell transplant. Through it all, she was a fighter and maintained a strong hope she would beat the disease.

But she couldn't beat it. Near the end, my mother told me she was through fighting. On my birthday, she declined all life-saving measures and chose to be treated only for end-of-living pain management. She died a week later. Caring for her was very redemptive and meaningful to me, but I took her death very hard.

In the weeks and months following her death, I went through the 48 years of things in the home that represented my parents' love for each other. Every picture, every piece of furniture, and every scrap of paper held a treasure of memories. It was wonderful and terrible.

The heartache seemed unbearable, but God met me there. Since I left college, I've kept a journal of my thoughts and feelings. Every night after Mom died, I got on my knees and told God, "It hurts. It hurts!" In those moments, I sensed his presence . . . his kindness.

I wrote a poem about cutting, and felt God's love even then. I asked him, "Wait! After all I've done, you love even me?"

The response came with exquisite warmth, "Yes, I love you so much."

I wrote another poem about harming myself, and I told God, "You must really hate me for that!"

The message came back strong and clear, "No, I don't hate you. I love you more than you can imagine!"

I wrote, "But I want you to hate me."

God responded, "But I love you!"

I felt bold enough to ask, "So . . . you're saying that I can be saved? I can be forgiven, loved, and accepted?"

I waited for God to say, "No, you're too far gone. You're too much to handle. Maybe others can be rescued, but not you." But that's not what I heard. I could feel his smile, "Yes, that's what I'm saying. I love you, I forgive you, and I accept you."

I began reading the Bible, and God put some strong women of faith in my life to help me take steps in knowing and loving him. I call them my "Foster moms." My therapist was always amazingly supportive. At one point, I was exasperated with myself, and I asked her, "Why don't you just give up on me?"

She leaned back and smiled, "Because I have God on my side."

Time and time again, I tested her and pushed back on her. She assured me that even if I gave up on myself, God would never give

up on me. Her strength and confidence gave me courage. No matter what I said or did, or what I threatened to do, nothing shook her trust in God and her kindness to me.

I've learned a lot about God and his love for me. I realized my parents loved me because I was born into their family, but God chose me, saved me, and adopted me as his own. It's such a privilege to be his adopted daughter!

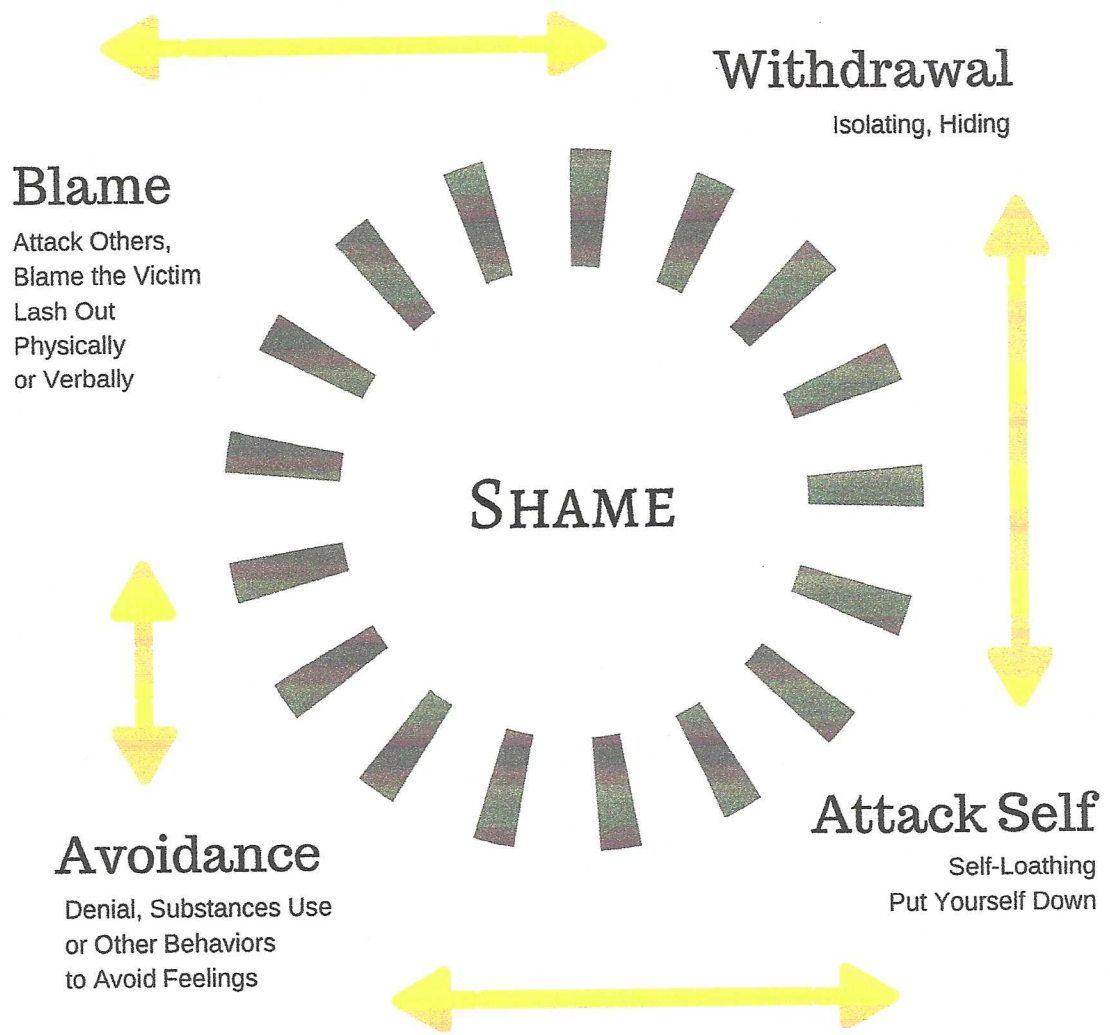
Today, I have a very different life than what I endured for so many years. God has given me such love and safety, and he has

given me a desire to help others. I'm no longer completely self-absorbed. I don't hate myself any longer. I live in truth. I'm in awe . . . I'm beyond grateful for all God has done for me, in me, and to me. I can reach out to touch others the way those special people reached out to touch me.

My life's story is no longer only about my wounds, my flaws, and my hopelessness. My story is about the wonder of God's amazing love.

None of us is too far gone. I'm living proof of that.





# CONNECTION SKILLS

The shame that hinders our connections with others follows a predictable cycle.



Use the diagram as a starting point, but now, draw your cycle and write in the words that best describe your experience at each stage.

When did this shame cycle begin in your life? What made the associated behaviors attractive? What thoughts or behaviors perpetuate your personal shame cycle?

How has shame affected your most important relationships?

Has shame led you to isolate yourself from others, to be too compliant to others' demands, to attack those who threaten you, or escape by using a substance or behavior . . . or more than one of these? Explain your answer.

Each cycle starts with the unique, underlying or root issues. Spend some time identifying your unique underlying issues. How can you begin to address them?

What are your strengths and weaknesses at each point of the shame cycle?

The cycle of shame can be broken with four insightful, courageous, and tenacious steps adapted from shame researcher Brené Brown:

## **STEP 1: UNDERSTAND & RECOGNIZE YOUR TRIGGERS.**



What events, actions, feelings, and thoughts trigger your shame cycle?

» Events:

» Actions:

» Feelings:

» Thoughts:

» Others:



## STEP 2: REALITY-CHECK.

When you recognize beliefs that produce and reinforce shame, it's important to challenge these beliefs. You can do this by talking with people you trust about your thoughts and feelings and getting their feedback. If you are alone, you can ask yourself, "Would I ever say or think this about a friend or a loved one?" For example, if I'm having the thought, "I'm worthless," would I tell my best friend, "You're worthless!" The answer to this question is always "No!" and it helps us identify shame. Once you have identified the shaming thought, turn it around. For example, "I'm worthless" changes to "I'm not the only one who makes mistakes" and "I'm bad" changes to "I did something bad."

## STEP 3: REACH OUT & SHARE.

Overcoming shame always involves coming out of hiding to share your story with others who will listen, understand your pain, and support you as you take steps to reclaim your life. Verbalizing our experiences takes the shame out of them. Finally, someone understands what happened and why we've struggled so much. No more lies . . . no more secrets.

Vulnerability and empathy are powerful, *relationally-based* tools to silence the voice of shame. Vulnerability helps us come out of hiding and challenge the shameful thoughts. As we share our stories with others, we gain support and begin to see that we aren't alone in our problems. With their help, we can begin to distinguish the voice of truth and hope from the voice of shame. When we experience empathy, we can have compassion for ourselves and for others, despite our wounds and imperfections. It helps us to see ourselves and others the way God sees us.

In her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Dr. Brené Brown encourages us to have the courage to live with a new self-perception, find new inner strength, and create new ways to relate to people. She writes,

"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."<sup>13</sup>

## STEP 4: SPEAK SHAME

Speaking shame involves not only being able to identify shame when you are experiencing it, but also using your words to express shame in a situation and ask for what you need. When we don't express shame, we will shut down or act out by turning to compulsive behaviors.

## KARA STOPPED HIDING

Kara Miller tried for years to hide from her pain, but eventually, she couldn't hide any longer. She realized that part of her story was that when she was at her worst, God and a friend still loved her.

After I trusted in Jesus, I wasn't drinking or using, but my eating disorder was still going full on, and my thoughts were still plagued with self-hatred and shame. I had taken myself off my meds (which isn't recommended) because I was afraid they'd make me gain weight. I still had a long, long way to go. I wanted to go to meetings to deal with my food disorder, but I didn't want to only hear about eating healthy meals. That's important, but I needed to address the deeper spiritual issues. I looked for groups where women talked about trusting God, finding his love and power, and walking together to encourage each other. I found a group like this, and it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever experienced. When I called one of them from the group and said, "I'm in my bed, binging on ice cream," she didn't shame me or rescue me. She just affirmed me as a person and completely understood my pain. She (and many others in the group) normalized the pain, took the power out of food, and replaced the shame with unconditional love.

One night I was really low. I went to the group, but all I could say was, "I need help." I left before anyone could talk to me, and I went home and binged. I was so full I could barely walk. I went into the bathroom and put my finger down my throat, and I heard a voice: "You don't have to do this anymore. This isn't worth it."

Jesus saw me in that bathroom, and Jesus loved me in that bathroom. I fell on the floor and started crying. I prayed, "You're right. I can't live like this anymore. I'd rather you take me while I'm sleeping tonight. I'm so lost! I give you my life. I give you everything. I need your help."

That night, I slept better than I'd slept in years. The next morning, I felt different . . . more hopeful. I called a lady in our program

and asked for her help. I said, "I don't know how to eat. Would you teach me?"

She was so sweet. She asked me to eat all my meals with her for a while so we could do it together. For the next year, we ate together almost every day. I ate what she ate, and I watched her live her life. She seemed so free, so happy, so unencumbered by all the shame that had plagued me all my life. She wasn't afraid of food. She was my role model.

The nagging desire to drink or use stayed with me. I wondered if those thoughts would ever leave. At crucial times, God has brought particular people into my life to help me take the next step in my healing journey. At one point, I had been sick for three weeks with bronchitis. I went to a church, and the pastor asked if anyone wanted to come forward to receive Jesus or rededicate their lives. For some reason, I went forward. When he talked to me, he said, "I can see Jesus in your eyes. You know him. How can I help?"

I told him I'd been sick. He looked deeper into my soul and told me, "I'll pray for your healing, but I'll also pray that God will show you who you really are as his child, that your identity is based on his grace, not on what you've done or not done." He prayed for me, and the next day, the bronchitis was gone. More importantly, three months later, I realized I hadn't even thought about drinking or using since that day he prayed for me at the front of the church. God was doing a deep work in my heart and mind, but he wasn't finished yet.

Kara found a friend she could trust with all the mess in her life. Now that you've written your story at the end of Chapter 5 and worked through the cycles in Chapter 8, spend time with someone to tell your story and bear your soul. Take a step to reach out and find a friend—or better, two or three. The mutual understanding, affirmation, feedback, and support will help you grow in your faith and take big steps in recovery.



Who will you tell? When?

What do you hope will happen as you share it honestly and openly?

For each point on your cycle, describe how you can intervene to break the cycle using the four steps. At what points do you have the skills to stop the cycle of shame? At what points are you weakest and need the most help?

Focus on the points that you are strongest and commit to working on these with an accountability partner or sponsor.

When we speak negative words over ourselves, we activate a powerful spiritual principle: Proverbs 18:21 states, “Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.” Because shame attacks the very essence of who we are, when we partner with shame, we are hurting ourselves in the deepest part, our spirit. Positive messages bring life, growth, and joy, but negative messages crush our spirit. When we realize we’re poisoning ourselves with our own words of shame, we need to break the spiritual tie to shame that our words created.

Pray this powerful prayer out loud to break the unhealthy spiritual ties that shame can create:

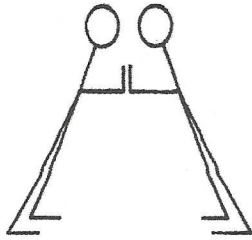
Father God, I choose today to break off any and all of the ways I have knowingly or unknowingly partnered with the voice of shame. I break off all the effects of shame on my body, soul, and spirit. I take back anything that shame has stolen from me—especially my true identity as your beloved child. Father God, forgive me for any and all of my thoughts and behaviors of self-hatred. Show me what you have for me instead of shame.





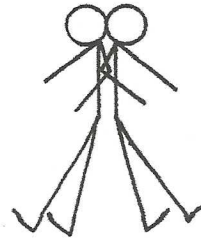
What did God give you in exchange for shame and self-hatred? Write or draw a picture of what God showed you here:

What words of life does God have for you? Declare these truths over yourself.



A-FRAME DEPENDENCY

Two people lean on each other because they have not learned to be whole on their own. Feels good sometimes but when one person wants to move, change, or grow, it upsets the other who is leaning on them.



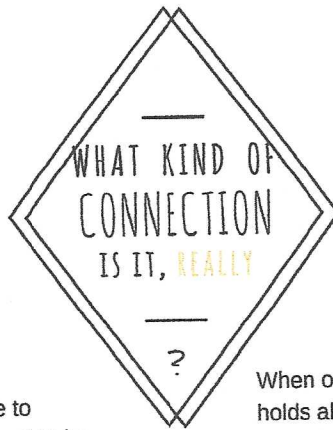
BOARDING HOUSE/BACK TO BACK

Two people connected and living together by agreement only (ex. marriage). A loveless "roommate" type relationship without much connection. It's very confining. If one person tries to move forward, change, or grow, the other is bound by that change as well.

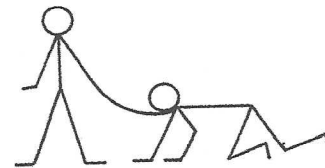
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"I can't live without you." "I live to make you happy." "Feels so good to be so close to you." This is seen in the early stages of many romantic relationships but can also occur with family & friends. Feels intoxicating in the beginning but leaves no room for growth. Eventually one or both persons feels trapped.



SLAVE / MASTER



When one person makes all the decisions & holds all the power in the relationship. This causes emotional distance, power struggles, poor communication, & breaks down intimacy.



THE MARTYR

The person on the bottom completely sacrifices themselves and their needs to serve others. But don't let the martyr fool you. They hold most of the power in the relationship. If the Martyr moves, the person above who has come to rely on them is thrown off. Martyrs are very good at controlling others, esp. through guilt. This leaves others unable or afraid to express needs. Expression comes with feelings of anger or guilt.



PEDESTAL

False relationship based on one person's idolized and idealized image of the other. The person on the pedestal may enjoy the worship but also has to live up to expectations. No real intimacy here.

## BETTER CONNECTIONS

If we move toward people and take risks to trust them, we'll inevitably get hurt. When we step toward them, they may not meet us halfway. There is no chance of real relationships without real risks of being hurt again, but the risk is worth it—even a few rich, real relationships make life worthwhile.

Study the diagram on the opposite page. It's based on the work of a world-renowned family therapist, Virginia Satir. She gets at the heart of the types of unhealthy connections.<sup>14</sup>



Take a moment to journal any reactions or reflections you have concerning the diagrams in this section. What patterns of connection did Janelle find herself in?

What patterns do you find yourself in and with whom?

A healthy relationship is made up of two people who can stand secure on their own because their source of identity is in God alone and not tied up in another person. They have made a *choice* to be in a relationship of mutual respect, love, and support—and to be true to that relationship even in hard times. They are responsible *to* the other person but not responsible *for* the other person. Both recognize that they are responsible for the maintenance and protection of their own well-being. They strive, with God's help, to live out his model of love as Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Genuine love is strong enough to speak the truth and do what is best for someone else, even if he or she doesn't like it. Genuine love also pursues wisdom to make sure we're acting like mature, responsible adults instead of being doormats, compulsively fixing because we're afraid, or dominating because we're angry.



Draw and describe what you think a healthy relationship looks like.



## GOOD FENCES

Healthy relationships always involve healthy boundaries. You can't have one without the other. In their book, *Boundaries*, John Townsend and Henry Cloud use a metaphor of building fences to illustrate how to have healthy boundaries. Imagine your life as a house with a yard. Some of us have erected concrete walls with barricaded gates and barbed wire to keep people out! But some of us have no fences at all, so people, nice and nasty, have full access to every part of our hearts, our time, and our priorities. Townsend and Cloud observe:

"Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom. Taking responsibility for my life opens up many different options. Boundaries help us keep the good in and the bad out. Setting boundaries inevitably involves taking responsibility for your choices. You are the one who makes them. You are the one who must live with their consequences. And you are the one who may be keeping yourself from making the choices you could be happy with. We must own our own thoughts and clarify distorted thinking."<sup>15</sup>

We need to construct good fences and effective gates: fences to define and protect our boundaries and gates to allow *invited* guests in. We are responsible to take care of our house, yard, and possessions, just as others are responsible for their own house, yard, and possessions.

To take responsibility for our own well-being, we first need to evaluate the current state of our boundaries. Is our fence completely missing? Or is it trampled down by people who didn't respect our wishes? Maybe it lacks a gate because we just can't risk the hurt any interaction might cause. If our fence and gate are defective—if we've been weak and allowed people to push us around—we need to find stronger material

and do the work to erect the fence and build the gate. What does this look like? It means we respect ourselves, we learn the language of honesty and truth, we practice saying "yes," and we practice saying "no." We gain enough wisdom in knowing how to keep certain people outside the fence, and we develop enough trust to let certain people through the gate, to the porch, and in the house.

But many others are hiding behind high concrete barriers, refusing to come out or let anyone in. We're always peering over the top to see if anyone might set foot on our land, and we either hide underground or fire our guns when someone steps on our property—even those who genuinely love us. People who have rigid boundaries need to find one trustworthy person and take small steps to be more vulnerable, to come out from behind the wall at least a few steps . . . or invite the trusted friend to come inside for a while. Gradually, she can begin to demolish the concrete as she erects a good fence and a gate on the edge of the property. This process takes a while, and it requires effort and courage, but it's the path to meaningful relationships *and* adequate protection.

Fences and gates are constructed one board at a time, one nail at a time, and one hinge at a time. Every time you clarify your goal of putting your fence and gate at a certain place, you've made progress. Then, every time you choose to say "yes" and "no," you nail a board in place and screw a hinge on your gate. The finished work takes time, support, and courage, but before long, the boundary begins to take shape . . . and it begins to let you live with healthy vulnerability.

When we begin to set our boundaries, two things happen: we feel uncomfortable because we've never done it before, and the people affected don't like it! They may tell us, "You're being so selfish!" If we believe them, we give in again and nothing changes. But if we find the support and strength to

remain strong, we give ourselves and others the opportunity to be healthy, mature, and responsible. Boundaries, then, are a test for us and other people. If we truly respect ourselves,

we'll reinforce our boundaries; if others truly love us, they'll respect our boundaries.



Think about where you've been, where you are today, and where you want to go in your healing and growth. Draw or describe three versions of your property, your house, your fence, and your gate.

» When you were at your worst, before you began recovery and healing:

» Today:

» What real strength, wisdom, and good boundaries will look like:

How have your missing or trampled fence and gate—or your concrete wall—affected your heart and your relationships?

As you think about taking the next steps to build your fence and gate—and monitoring them so you're in control—what are you thinking and feeling? What are your hopes and fears? What's clear and what's confusing?

## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Setting boundaries lets you live with more peace and security, and it lets you be more assertive in relationships—especially, your difficult relationships. Boundaries aren't much good if we don't communicate what we want and expect from others. To communicate clearly and boldly, we use "I messages" instead of "you messages." We may have developed the habit of always reacting to others' desires and demands, so we respond, "You said this" or "You meant that." But now, we begin to *own* our thoughts, emotions, and choices. We say, "I feel (hurt, angry, sad, or afraid)" instead of "You made me feel (hurt, angry, sad, or afraid)."

We can say, "This is what I believe," "This is what I want," and "This is what I plan to do." Increasingly, we are actors instead of reactors.

When people cross our boundaries—break down our



What are some ways you can enforce your boundaries?

fence or come through our gate without being invited—we need to reaffirm our boundary with clarity and strength. We might say, "Maybe you didn't understand what I said about how I want us to relate. Let me explain it again."

If we don't enforce our boundaries, we really don't have them at all. It may be scary for you to tell people their behavior isn't acceptable anymore and you want to relate in a more respectful, healthy way. Start small, but start by speaking up about what you want and expect in the relationship. If the person still tramples your fence and comes in uninvited, it's a clear signal that all of your painful emotions are perfectly valid.

To be clear and strong, we need the help of a counselor, a sponsor, or a wise friend. We're not alone. We may be afraid, but we can borrow their courage.

How do you feel as you contemplate telling someone he or she has violated your boundary?

Anyone can improve communication by following these seven principles:

### **Think first**

We often make one of two mistakes: we speak before we think, or we don't say a word because we're paralyzed by the fear of saying the wrong thing. In casual conversations with people we trust, the intensity level and the risks are low. But in any conversation that carries emotional risk, we need to stop for a second (or an hour or a day or two) and think before we speak. This pause gives us an opportunity to gather our thoughts, get valuable input, consider and pray about what we plan to say, and anticipate how the other person will hear us.

### **Use "I" statements**

When we say, "You said this" or "You did that," the hearer is put on the defensive. We will lower the resistance level if we use "I" statements like we just outlined, including "I feel . . . I want . . . I will . . ."

### **Express empathy**

Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Try to understand the situation from his or her point of view. Invite self-disclosure by saying something like, "Tell me what you were thinking and feeling at the time." When it's appropriate, offer words of understanding and comfort.

### **Listen . . . really listen**

Instead of daydreaming about running away or trying to think of the next thing you want to say, focus on listening to the person—not just the words, but watch for non-verbal messages, as well. One of the ways to tell if you're really listening is whether you ask follow up questions or if you say, "That's helpful. Tell me more about that."

Listening exercise: The next time you spend time with a friend, practice really listening. Ask a question, and then ask one or two follow up questions to get to your friend's deeper feelings and perceptions. As you listen, notice the nonverbal messages. Then mirror the response back to him/her. You can say, "This is what I hear you saying . . ."





After the conversation, think about these questions:

» How did you feel as you listened, noticed, and mirrored your friend's statements?

» How did your friend feel?

» What, if anything, happened in the relationship?

## Mirror the response

One of the most effective communication strategies is to mirror the person's statement. You might say, "Here's what I hear you saying" and then try to paraphrase it in your own words. The person might say, "That's exactly it!" or she might respond, "No, that's not what I was trying to say." If that's the case, you can say, "I'm sorry. Would you explain it to me again?" Don't leave the conversation until the person is convinced that you fully understand the point . . . and the implication of the point.

## Look for common ground

In difficult conversations, it's easy to demand full and quick compliance. When we don't get it (and we seldom do), both people walk away more wounded than before. Instead, look for something you can build on. You might say, "Where can we go from here?" or "What's a good next step for us?" The next step may be to cool off and come back to try again in a day or a week.

## Be willing to lose if you want to win

*Power plays* harm good communication. Some people are insecure, which comes out as pride. They insist on being one up: "I'm right and you're wrong. You'd better do what I demand." But others express their insecurity in shame. They're one down: "I'm wrong and you're right. I'll do whatever you say."

As you practice communication skills, you'll learn to look for ways to move forward toward resolution of the difficulty so you can build or rebuild trust. But you'll also become aware that you can only go so far in your attempts. Reconciliation always takes two.

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**CHOOSE TO BE KIND OVER BEING RIGHT  
AND YOU'LL BE RIGHT EVERY TIME.**

**RICHARD CARLSON**



Describe how trying to be one up (pride) prevents real friendships from developing.

Describe how being one down (shame) harms relationships?

## CLEAN UP YOUR MESSSES

Better communication begins when we take the initiative to make amends for what we've done that harmed another person. Hurting people hurt people. As we experience God's forgiveness, we then ask people we've wronged to forgive us. We speak honestly, not defending ourselves or blaming the other person. We take responsibility for what we've done—no more and no less. We describe the offense, and we say, "I was wrong. Please, forgive me." If we've damaged anything, we need to repair it; if we've stolen anything, we need to pay it back—as much as we possibly can. There are always risks and no guarantees, but even the attempt reminds us how much we depend on God for his love, his forgiveness, and his strength.

The conversation can include three "I" statements: I feel, I want, I will. If we've hidden our hearts from someone who intimidates us, we might say:

"I feel sad that I haven't been honest with you in the past. I was afraid. Please, forgive me."

"I want a relationship based on trust, respect, and authenticity."

"I will be more honest with you in the future. This means we may need to have some difficult conversations, but I'm making a commitment to resolve things quickly instead of letting fear and resentment build."



What does it mean that "hurt people hurt people"?

Which of these principles do you do fairly well? Which ones need some work?

What difference will they make for you and your relationships?

What's a difficult conversation you've been avoiding?

How will you apply these principles in this conversation? Write a script of what you want to say.

What specific steps do you want to take to make amends, heal hurts, and restore strained or broken relationships?

Who will help you take these steps?

What do you hope God will do in you and through you as you communicate with grace and truth?

My Sunday experience with the children's choir continues to challenge me. I need Holy Spirit to remind me that the secret to experiencing a life without hesitation, insecurity, or fear lies in reconnecting to the child-like joy he has placed in each of us. A life lived in authenticity helps me access this radiant joy. When I'm fully present to each moment and I allow him to help me see myself and other's through his eyes, he puts his *love filter* on my life and, like the children did that day, I can't help but scatter joy.

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**SCATTER JOY!**

**RALPH WALDO EMERSON**