

A Journey to Healing After Emotional Abuse

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CHAPTER 3

Practice Self-Care

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted . . .

—ISAIAH 61:1

What is self-care? This simply means *taking care of you*. This may be a foreign concept! For a long time your life revolved around your abuser, making *him* happy, anticipating his needs, avoiding his anger. If you're a mother, you probably now focus on the needs of your hurting children. Or, you may be taking care of your aging parents or seeing to the needs of a coworker. The idea of taking care of you may seem laughable.

You may think taking care of yourself is selfish. Many girls learn at a young age to take care of others, putting the needs of others before their own. I believe this is built into girls from birth. When my first daughter was born, I was determined not to force her into stereotypical feminine roles. I bought her a small toy truck and a little baby doll. I gave them both to her at the same time, with equal excitement. She looked at the truck and watched with disinterest as I rolled it back and forth, making “vroom, vroom” sounds. When I handed her the doll, she immediately grabbed it and pulled it to her chest. From that moment on, her doll was rarely out of her arms. She was not yet walking, but she dragged it behind her everywhere as she crawled around, as though this doll was hers and hers alone to care for. When my son was born, I gave him the

same choice. He didn't even look at the doll, but loved that truck!

Given that women are born nurturers who are often trained to put the needs of others before themselves—and, if you are a woman, you have recently left an abusive relationship where his needs took precedence over *your* needs—then you must realize that learning to take care of yourself may be a challenge. However, this is an important step in your healing process. Why?

When you take care of yourself, you can focus on healing from the abuse you've suffered, which takes time and energy.

1. You must value yourself in order to focus on your journey to healing. Healing from emotional abuse will take time and energy. It won't happen overnight, or by wishful thinking.
2. You have been through a terrible ordeal. You will need to be kind to yourself to begin making up for the cruelty you've suffered.
3. In the midst of the trauma of emotional abuse and then the stress of leaving and setting up a new household, your body can literally forget how to relax. God gave us the ability to go through hard times and to emotionally and physically carry a heavy load for a time, but our bodies aren't wired to carry that load indefinitely. Our minds and bodies need permission, and time, to practice relaxing.
4. Though you may not think you are worthy of time and care, God disagrees. He loved you enough to send his only son to earth to die a horrible death so you could be with Him in eternity. John 3:16, 17 says it simply:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

5. You need to learn self-care so you can be emotionally healthy enough to give of yourself to your children, family, friends, coworkers, and later on, possibly a mate.

Have I convinced you yet that taking care of yourself is important? I hope so. Let's take a closer look.

Work to Free Yourself from Any Addictions You May Have

While most of the advice I describe in this chapter can be considered fun, the first one isn't fun, but painful and difficult. Ask yourself if you're addicted to any substances. Do you rely on alcohol to get you through the day? Do you look forward to your first drink? Does that first drink come earlier and earlier in the day? If so, you're not alone. Many abuse victims struggle with addictions. You've been abused, which was a harrowing experience. You may be suffering from depression and/or anxiety. Perhaps your abuser used drugs or alcohol to keep control over you. Your addiction is not something to feel guilty about, but it is something to *do something* about.

What about drugs? If you are using marijuana, or any illegal substance, you must work to free yourself from these right away. These substances are dead-end roads to despair. While you may not take illegal drugs, you may be addicted to prescription drugs or even over-the-counter medications. Be honest with yourself. Do you use these to excess? If you told your mother, best friend, or pastor the number of pills you take daily, would you be embarrassed?

Perhaps you don't struggle with these things, but you do struggle with what is known as a process addiction. Process addictions are anything you do repeatedly and to excess to make yourself feel better, such as gambling, eating, sleeping, shopping, having sex, watching television, spending time on the Internet and social media, watching any amount of pornography—even exercise can be an addiction if done to excess.

Yes, you've been through a terrible ordeal. When you were being abused, your addiction helped you cope with your pain and stress. Now you are free, and your addiction is no longer a coping mechanism; now it is a vice standing in the way of your healing. You are taking an important step toward healing by reading this book. Next, you will have to disengage yourself from your addiction(s).

This will be difficult, and you cannot do it alone. The best results come from joining a support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, or Celebrate Recovery. There are many others, depending on your addiction. Be honest with yourself, and seek help immediately. *The advice I give in the rest of this book will be worthless if you are strangled by an addiction.*

Resist the Temptation to Isolate Yourself

You may want to isolate yourself from friends and family because you are depressed. Some signs of depression include¹²:

- a change in sleep habits (sleeping more or less than usual); fatigue
- a change of appetite/weight (eating more or having no desire for food)
- indecisiveness and decreased concentration
- feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- having thoughts of suicide or death
- no longer finding pleasure in things you used to enjoy
- depressed mood
- constantly feeling worked up/keyed up.

If you think you may be depressed, please read Chapter 6 about seeking counseling.

You may want to isolate yourself because you are embarrassed by your abuse, especially if you are a Christian. Domestic violence is a hard topic for many to discuss. Some people may not know what to say, and others may have strong opinions about your life decisions. You may be surprised at how little emotional support you have received from family, friends, and other church members. They may have never seen your ex-partner behave badly, and they believe you should take him back. Many Christians may believe you have “no right to divorce,” and won’t hesitate to let you know it. Experiencing situations like these may make you hesitate to leave the house for fear of who you might bump into, or make you afraid to open up to people because of the hurtful responses you have already received.

If you have experienced this type of thing, what should you do? I don’t recommend hiding out in your home. Prepare a gentle but firm response to use the next time someone feels they have a right to comment on your decisions. You might say something like, “I am sure you have my best interest at heart, and I thank you for your concern. However, you didn’t experience what I did, so you can’t understand what I went through. I made the best decisions I could, based on what happened in my life. I know you will honor my right to decide what is best for me, just as I

allow you to decide what is best for you.” If they continue to harass you after you say this, smile and walk away. Part of the healing process is learning to make, and stand by, your decisions. You don’t owe anyone an explanation.

Alternatively, you may find many who support you and your decision to leave your abuser. You will not know if you’re hiding out at home. Many people today satisfy themselves with “cyber” friends, i.e., friends they find via their computer, as with Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and the like. While I believe these social media friends have their place, I

Flesh and blood friends will help you more than cyber friends. Leave the house and be with real people.

strongly believe cyber friends do not take the place of the real flesh and blood friends we can see and touch. A hug from a friend is incredibly healing.

What if you don’t have supportive friends? I recommend you find a domestic violence support group. Contact your nearest women’s crisis center and ask them to recommend one. Churches in your area may also offer them. I have experienced great healing from both. You might be surprised how similar your new friends’ stories of abuse sound to yours. You will realize you are not the only person who has suffered abuse.

Another great source of healing may come from finding a mentor at your church. Many churches will match older women with younger women. I asked my church for a mentor when I was escaping my abusive ex-husband. She met with me every week for years. Even though we no longer live near each other, I still call her whenever I struggle with a problem. She helps me focus on the Lord, and I always feel better after I talk to her. Each mentor/mentee relationship will look different. You may feel comfortable sharing your past abuse, or you may not. Your mentor may or may not have experience with abuse in her past. Hopefully, she will be someone with healthy boundaries, is mature in her relationship with the Lord, and will pray for and with you.

My friend Laurie looks for people in her life she respects, and thinks of them as role models. They could be friends, coworkers, relatives, or church members. These people usually handle stress well, have a positive attitude, and display a good work ethic. Laurie learns from them as she observes and interacts with them. Doing this encourages her to associate

with people she respects and admires rather than choosing friends who will tell her what she wants to hear.

You may think you don't need people, but only God, for your healing. God disagrees. Hebrews 10:24, 25 says:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.

God gave us each other to be His hands and feet. We are each a part of Christ's body, the church, as it says in 1 Corinthians 12:14-21:

Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

*The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!"
And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"*

No, we cannot say to one another, "I don't need you." We do need one another, just as our bodies need our hands, feet, and eyes. Spending time alone with God reading our Bibles, in private worship and prayer, is important. But it isn't enough. We need to hear our pastors preach the word to gain new insights. We need to pray for others and have them pray for us. We need to serve others and be served to fully grasp how Christ serves us. The love of God is best felt through the arms and love of His people.

Take Care of Your Physical Body

Leaving—and healing from—an abusive relationship is extremely stressful. Your body may show the signs of the stress. While dealing with

your emotions may make sense to you, you may neglect your physical health, not realizing how much your physical health affects your emotional and spiritual health.

Many former abuse victims have physical ailments that have no apparent causes. I personally suffer from migraine headaches, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), and interstitial cystitis (constant pain in the bladder). Other former victims I know suffer from fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes, asthma, and eating disorders.

Due to your many life changes, you may think you have no time to take care of your body. You may be suddenly working full time, and now you are the only parent in your kids' lives. You may be caring for a home by yourself, not to mention all the emotional strain you and your children are experiencing. However, if you neglect taking care of your physical body, you will not be able to do all the things you need to do. You should plan to:

- Spend a few minutes outdoors in natural sunlight each day. This will help you absorb vitamin D, but more importantly, it will help you fight depression. People who get no natural sunlight are more apt to become depressed.¹⁴
- Learn one or more relaxation techniques to help combat stress and anxiety. Spend a few minutes a day practicing a technique.
- Exercise three times a week—and you don't need to join an expensive gym. Walk up and down the stairs of your apartment or office building, take your dog for a long walk, or ride bikes with your kids.
- Eat three well-balanced meals a day; lay off the caffeine and chocolate. While they may make you feel better in the short term, they often trigger headaches. Stay away from French fries, cookies, and chips. These empty calories may taste good while you're eating them, but they do little to protect you from viruses and do not strengthen your muscles and bones; instead, they add pounds you don't need. Eat mainly lean meats, fruits, and vegetables. They have less calories and preservatives. And if you eat at home the majority of the time rather than eating out, you will save a lot of money and get more quality time with your kids.
- Get at least seven or eight hours of sleep a night; make sleep a priority. Lack of sleep will have a negative effect on your body and mind.

Try to limit the list of things that “must” be done. If you have children, enlist their help—you don’t have to be super-mom.

- See your medical doctor when you should. Schedule yearly checkups with your gynecologist and general/family practitioner. Make sure you get your pap smears and mammograms when you should. When you get sick, don’t suffer in silence; go to the doctor and get some medicine. Nothing will halt your healing more than finding out you have cancer you could have caught earlier, or realizing a simple cold has turned to pneumonia.

Taking care of your physical body is wise:

- Get sunshine daily
- Exercise regularly
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get enough sleep
- Go to the doctor when needed

Indulge Yourself Daily

Plan to do at least one kind thing for yourself each day. Make a list of simple life pleasures you enjoy. These ideas don’t have to cost anything or take very much time. Examples:

- take a hot bath
- read a novel
- drink a cup of hot tea while you read a magazine
- call your sister or best friend
- exercise (more on this below).

The time you invest in yourself will have several benefits. You will find your self-esteem improving as you put yourself first, and your stress will decrease as you take these short breaks.

Regularly Practice Relaxation Techniques

Healing from emotional abuse can be painful. As you begin to address difficult memories and work toward healing, you may find yourself becoming stressed and anxious. This may even cause you physical pain at times. If you ever become afraid for yourself or others, call 911 immediately. To help relieve and/or prevent stress, you might find practicing

relaxation wise. Some of these might sound “New Age,” but they don’t need to be. You can worship God while you learn to relax.

While you lived with your abuser, you were under continual stress. You may find your body has forgotten how to relax. These techniques can help reteach it. Use them when you feel extremely stressed, before reading a difficult chapter of this book, and before or during a counseling appointment.

Relaxation Breathing¹⁵

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen and get as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.

Visualization Meditation



Journal Your Journey

My counselor called this “going to your happy place.” She asked me to choose a place I’d been where I was able to completely relax. Also, a place I had been alone (when you imagine yourself with others, sometimes your emotions about them get in the way of the relaxation). My counselor asked me to write as much as I could

about this place as I experienced it, detailing all five senses. I chose the beach I went to every year as a child. I pictured the waves crashing on the sand, the sound of the birds calling to each other, the feel of the grains of sand and the hot sun on my back, the smell of sun lotion, and the taste of my favorite ice cream cone. Being a writer, I wrote five pages. My husband wrote about a cabin in the woods, and filled all of one paragraph. Do whatever feels right to you! The more detail you use, the easier it will be to imagine yourself actually there. I also sometimes use this to get back to sleep if I wake up in the night stressing over things I can't control.

Yoga

I put off taking a yoga class for years, though many friends had recommended it to me. I knew it is often seen as very New Age, and even considered anti-Christian, and I didn't want to deal with that. When I finally tried it, I found that to indeed be true. But when instructors begin giving New Age advice, I just pray to Jesus.

Yoga movements are helpful for relaxation. What I found most interesting, though, was when I started to cry at the beginning of my second class. I really wanted to weep, though I held back. This happened again at the end of the class. The instructor explained that we hold trauma in our bodies. He was excited his class had begun the process of releasing the emotions I had experienced more than ten years ago. He said he would welcome me weeping during his class!

Massage

I have found massage extremely helpful in dealing with my daily physical pain, and I know it is helpful for many other former abuse victims. There are many massage membership chains popping up all over the US where you can get a regular massage for a reasonable price. Massage schools also offer low-cost or free massages so their students can get practice.

If you have been sexually abused, or if you struggle with PTSD (see Chapter 6), you might find it hard at first to relax enough to enjoy a massage. If this is you, search for a massage therapist who is trained in therapeutic or medical massage. Let your therapist know about your past abuse and ask her to work with you to overcome your fears.

Other Forms of Physical Healing

Acupuncture

In the past, acupuncture was looked down upon as Eastern medicine and not considered valid by Western medical culture. This is no longer the case. Many standard medical schools now offer training in acupuncture, and it can manage the symptoms of a variety of ailments, such as migraines, asthma, chronic pain, IBS, and fibromyalgia.

Prayer

The Bible says to ask God for healing. James 5:14, 15 says:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.

Sometimes our unexplained illnesses are caused by spiritual, rather than physical, ailments. There are many examples in the Bible of people being healed through prayer (Acts 3:1-10, 19:11). Though we live in the “age of reason,” we should not discount our God’s ability to heal our physical bodies. He can and often does. He would do it more often if we would only ask him. See Chapter 8 for more about fighting spiritual battles with spiritual weapons.

Take Care of Your Emotions

Taking care of your emotions is just as important as taking care of your physical body.

Be Patient with Yourself and the Healing Process

Healing takes time. The longer your abuse lasted, the longer your healing will likely take. Don’t set unrealistic expectations for yourself. In fact, I would recommend not setting any expectations about your healing. Allow your soul to heal on its own timetable, and allow God to work through you as He wishes. Give yourself some grace.

You may feel wonderfully strong for several days in a row, then be surprised when you wake up feeling fearful, uncertain, or depressed the next day, even wishing you were back in your abusive relationship. Or,

you may feel great, and suddenly something unexpected “triggers”¹⁵ you, and you feel you are back in the midst of the abuse. This is normal. You can expect your healing process to feel like two steps forward and one step back. You may even feel it is sometimes one step forward, two steps back! As long as you are generally moving forward, do not be alarmed.

If you find yourself sinking into a deep depression, thinking of harming yourself or others, or contemplating suicide, I recommend you get help immediately. Call 911¹⁶ immediately. Seek counseling for less urgent needs. (I discuss this further in Chapter 6.)

Chances are good you repeat negative comments to yourself that your abuser used to say. You can train yourself to replace those negative thoughts with positive thoughts.

Stop Negative Self-Talk

During your former relationship, did your ex verbally abuse you or say negative things about you, like you are “stupid,” “don’t do anything right,” “you’re so ugly no one will ever want you,” or other derogatory things about your appearance?

If so, chances are good you have internalized his negative comments without being aware of it. We keep a running commentary in our minds all day long. Try this exercise:



Journal Your Journey

Write down everything you say to yourself over the course of a week. You may be surprised how often you say something negative to yourself. You might be repeating disparaging remarks your abuser used to say. You might also be repeating comments you heard as a child from your parents, teachers, or a bully. It’s extremely important to recognize what you tell yourself regularly.

Once you have a list of negative things you say to yourself, you can begin to substitute new, positive thoughts for your old negative ones. Often negative thoughts start with “I have to . . .” or “I must . . .” or “I always/never . . .” Be careful to frame the new thoughts in positive language instead of negative; i.e., don’t use “don’t.” For example:

Old, Negative Thoughts

I’m so stupid

New, Positive Thoughts

I am so smart

I never do anything right	I am so capable
I'm not smart enough to understand	Look how much I am learning
I'm always picking a fight	I am a real peacemaker
I have elephant thighs	My legs are so strong
My hair looks like a rat's nest	I love my hair's natural curl
I'm so ugly; I'll never find a mate	I am desirable

Whenever you find yourself thinking one of the old, negative thoughts, purposely speak the new, positive thought instead. You will find yourself thinking the positive thoughts about yourself more and more, and the negative thoughts will fade over time.

Schedule Stressful Thoughts

Are you a worrier? I am. I often find myself consumed with unreasonable fears. I recently heard of an idea that helps. I read it in *It's My Life Now: Starting Over After an Abusive Relationship or Domestic Violence* by Meg Kennedy Dugan, M.A., and Roger R. Hock, PhD.¹⁷ The authors call this idea thought partitioning. They base their idea on the elephant-in-the-room game. Let's say I told you not to think about the pink elephant sitting in the corner of the room. You would have trouble thinking about anything else! Thought partitioning uses the same philosophy. If I tell you not to think about the things that worry you, your worries will be at the forefront of your mind. Therefore, rather than worrying constantly, they recommend setting aside specific times to worry.



Journal Your Journey

Write down all the things you worry about for a week. Don't censor them; just write them down as they come to you. Then look over your list. Do you see patterns? Do you worry about money, your safety, or your kids? Next, schedule a "worry break" that works for you. Decide that you will work for 30 or 45 minutes (whatever you think you can sustain), then set aside 10 minutes to . . . worry. During those 10 minutes, worry as hard as you can! Then, return to work. Eventually you can move your worry breaks farther apart. If a worrisome thought intrudes during your work time, you can say, "Not now, I'll get to you later!"

Prioritize Your To-Do List

This goes along with scheduling your stressful thoughts. One of the things I stress about is having too many things to do. When you begin stressing about everything you must do, take out a sheet of paper and write down everything you need to do. For me, seeing it on paper sometimes makes it less stressful because the list isn't as long as I thought it was. Once you've written everything down, break the list into short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals. Short-term goals would be things you can *realistically* accomplish *today*. These would be tasks like calling your mother, taking a walk with your kids, washing two loads of laundry, or going to the grocery store.

Prioritize the most important items. If you have no food in the house, your most important task will probably be getting to the grocery store. If you have no clean clothes to wear, you will probably want to do some laundry. If you're feeling really stressed, don't try to do all of these things in one day; just pick one or two. When you decide on the list for today, say to yourself: "Don't panic. Do one thing at a time. Do the best you can." Repeat this as often as necessary.

Don't panic.
Do one thing
at a time.
Do the best
you can.

Once you get the hang of setting goals for yourself and understanding how much you can accomplish in a day, you will know what you can expect from yourself. If you get to the end of a day and you still have several tasks on your list, don't fret. First decide if they really need to be done. If not, take them off the list. If so, add them to your list for tomorrow, or move them to your medium- or long-term goal list.

Long-term goals may feel overwhelming. Break these tasks into goals you can reasonably accomplish in the short and medium terms. For example, if your long-term goal is to find a job, your short-term goal for today might be to begin writing your resume. Your medium-term goal for this week could be to finish your resume, write a cover letter, and apply for one job. Your goal for next week might be to apply for three jobs.

Enjoy that feeling of accomplishment as you draw a line through a task when you complete it. One less thing to stress about!

Learn to Trust God with Your Anxiety

Scheduling your stressful thoughts and prioritizing your to-do list are great ideas. But what about those big worries that just won't go away?

You know the ones I mean, like:

- If my ex shows up at my work, will my boss fire me this time?
- Will my son turn into an abuser like his father?
- Will my daughter forgive me for not protecting her from my abuser?

The summer my divorce became final, I had the opportunity to study *Calm My Anxious Heart* by Linda Dillow.¹⁸ The timing of the study was a perfect example of God giving me what I needed, exactly when I needed it, for I did have an anxious heart that summer. I was struggling with many *what-ifs*.

Dillow says that, for her, learning to trust God is like “playing catch” with Him. She tries to give her anxieties over to Him (by throwing Him the ball), but pretty soon, she is asking for the ball back. *Oh God, I know you have my children’s best interest at heart, but do You know they are having to spend half their time with their abusive father now? . . . I know You clothe the lilies of the field, but how will I pay my bills this winter?*

Dillow says if we truly trust God, we must stop playing catch with him. We must “give Him the ball,” trusting Him with the things we are worrying about, and not ask for it back.¹⁹

Dillow tells the story of Willis Carrier,²⁰ the brilliant engineer who launched the air-conditioning industry. Early in his career, Carrier was given a job he thought was impossible. He was so anxious he couldn’t sleep. He devised a three-step plan to handle his anxiety:

1. Ask yourself what’s the worst that can possibly happen.
2. Prepare to accept it if you have to.
3. Then calmly proceed to improve on the worst.

Carrier said that after deciding the worst that could happen—the company would lose money, and he would be fired from his job—and then reconciling himself to accepting it, he felt a sense of peace. From that time on, he was able to calmly put his energy into trying to improve on the worst *what-if*.

Linda thought this was helpful, but wasn’t sure it was biblical. She searched the Bible and decided it was! The apostle Paul had faced the worst his enemies could do to him and was able to say, “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (Philippians 1:21). Because of this attitude, he

was able to proclaim the gospel all over the world without fear.

Queen Esther is another example. She knew if she went before the king with her plea to take back his order to put all Jews to death, she might die. She said, *“If I perish, I perish”* (Esther 4:16). She faced the possibility of death, asked for prayer, then came up with a plan to try to keep the worst from happening.

Do you play catch with God? Try using Willis Carrier’s three-step approach. Then, throw the ball to God and trust Him with the results.

Allow Yourself Time to Mourn

... to comfort all who mourn . . .

—ISAIAH 61:2

Finding you need to mourn the loss of your abusive relationship may surprise you. Even if you ended the relationship, and you are generally happy about it, you have experienced many losses that need to be mourned. Let’s examine some things you may have lost.

1. **A friend and companion:** even though he was abusive at times, your partner was someone you could share your highs and lows with, talk through problems with, and work alongside (at least at times, or in the early days) to find solutions.
2. **Valued possessions:** perhaps he broke or stole items that were precious to you, or you had to give them up when you separated.
3. **Your home:** you may have had to leave your home when you left the relationship.
4. **Your job:** if you needed to move to escape your abuser, you probably lost your job.
5. **Friends and family:** you may have been close to his family and friends, and now you’ve lost those relationships.
6. **Your children or your dream of children:** if you wanted children but never had them, you may fear you never will. If you did have children with him, perhaps you had to leave your children behind to escape the relationship, even temporarily. Or you must now share custody with your abuser, or your relationship with your chil-

dren feels damaged because of your decision to leave. You may be mourning your dream of a healthy, “intact” family in which to raise your children.

7. **Your dreams:** perhaps you were sure he was “the one.” Maybe you feel like you broke a promise to him, yourself, your friends and family, and/or God when you left the relationship.
8. **Part of yourself:** perhaps you are mourning the years you lost to the abuse and the ways you acted because of it. Maybe you feel as if you’re not the same person you once were, you don’t like the person you’ve become, and even find yourself believing you can never get that person back again. Take heart. Chances are good that the parts of yourself you feel are missing are not completely gone. They will begin to reappear as you journey toward healing. In addition, new, stronger parts of you will emerge.

You may feel one, some, or nearly all of the above losses. There may be others I haven’t mentioned. The point is that you have lost some things that were valuable to you, and overcoming these losses will take time. People around you may not understand your need to mourn these losses. They may say, “You are so lucky to be rid of that abuser! Why are you crying?”

Our culture is uncomfortable with the idea of mourning. If someone appears sad, everyone tries to joke her into laughing. This is not the case, however, in every culture. In Orthodox Judaism²¹, after the death of a parent, there is a ritual week of mourning when the children do not leave the house. During the first three days, mourners do not respond when spoken to. After the first three days, friends can visit, but the *friends* are the hosts; the mourners’ only responsibility is to mourn. For the next three weeks, mourners slowly reenter society, but often have a tear in their clothing, and they do not shave. Full mourning does not end until an entire year after the death. During that year, entertaining and amusement is curtailed.

During the Civil War era in the southern United States²², a widow wore black from head to toe, and a heavy veil, for one year and a day, and sometimes for as long as two and a half years. For several months, she was not to go to any social events. After her time of “deep mourning,” she went into “half mourning” and was allowed to wear lavender or

gray. She was not allowed to remarry for up to four years after the death of her husband.

You have not experienced a death, but you have experienced the death of a relationship and the death of a dream. Allow yourself to feel this loss. If you don't, you will never fully be healed. You must mourn your losses in order to heal from them. You may feel you will never stop feeling sad, or you may fear the extent of your sadness or rage. Crying is OK. Find someone (besides your children; they have their own grief with which to deal) who will listen to you and share your grief. This could be a friend, a support group, or a counselor. The sooner you allow yourself to feel your loss, the better off you will be later.

Perhaps you don't believe you have anything that you need to mourn. Spend some time examining the list of losses I started this section with. Think through what your life looked like before you met your abuser, and compare it to what your life looks like now. Be honest with yourself. Are you better or worse off? What losses have you experienced?

I had trouble learning to mourn. I had become a master at denying my feelings when I lived with my abusive husband. He would ridicule me if I ever cried in front of him. He accused me of manipulating him with my tears, saying I had no reason to be sad. Also, I tried to hide my sorrow from people outside our home because he would be furious if he knew I told anyone what he was doing at home. After years of living like this, I could laugh and smile easily, but I had forgotten how to cry. Once I left the relationship, I would usually laugh when I described the worst abuse I had suffered.

If you, like me, have learned to deny your emotional pain, how can you begin to feel the pain you've denied for such a long time? Spend some time alone. Maybe you will do this in a dark room, at a coffee shop, or on a long walk, run, or drive. Whatever works best for you, do it. Think about the losses you've suffered. As you begin to feel sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, or other negative feelings, try not to talk yourself out of them. Don't allow others to, either. Your family and friends may

Allow yourself to feel the losses you've experienced. Mourning these losses is an important part of your healing process.

not like you spending time in mourning, and they may not understand why this is an important part of your journey to healing. If you don't do it now, though, your grief will never fully go away, and you will never fully heal.



Journal Your Journey

Write your feelings in a journal. Each time you allow yourself to mourn, reread what you have written, and add to those feelings. Over time, you will hopefully see your grief dissolving. If not, please read Chapter 6 of this book, and seek counseling.

Summary

Former abuse victims often find self-care challenging, but it is vital to healing from abuse. Once you begin to take care of yourself physically and emotionally, you will be better able to move forward in your journey to healing.

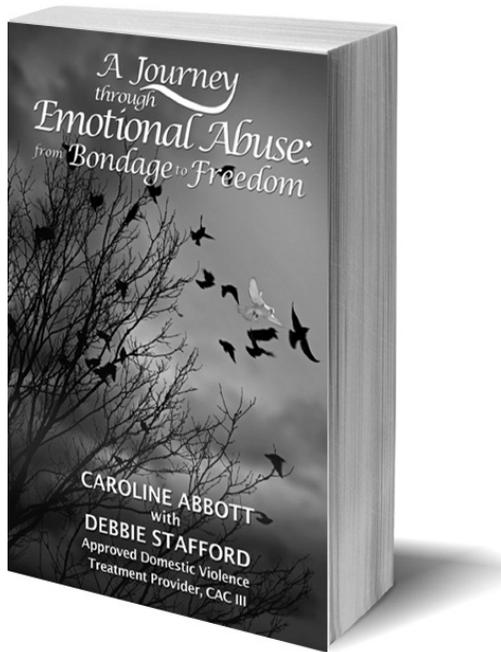


A Drink of Water for the Journey

"If you are traveling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your oxygen mask first, and then assist the other person."

—AIRLINE SAFETY SPEECH

1. Are you uncomfortable with the idea of taking care of yourself? Can you see why self-care is necessary for your healing process? Why or why not?
2. Do you tend to isolate yourself or depend on cyber friends? What are some ways you can spend more time with supportive friends?
3. Have you been taking care of your physical needs? If not, what things can you commit to begin doing today?
4. Do you find you often speak negatively to yourself? What types of things do you say? What positive statements can you replace those negative statements with?
5. Do you often feel stressed? Do the suggestions about scheduling your stressful thoughts and prioritizing your to-do list seem helpful? Why or why not?
6. Do you struggle with trusting God with your really tough anxieties? Would you be willing to try Willis Carrier's three-step method for handling your problems without worry?
7. Have you already spent time mourning your losses? Will you commit to spending more time mourning the losses you've experienced?



A JOURNEY THROUGH EMOTIONAL ABUSE: FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM

*By Caroline Abbott
With Debbie Stafford*

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