UNRAVELED ROOTS FOR WOMEN

4 CAUSES OF DAMAGING BEHAVIORS

C.K. GIGON

A SUPPORT AFTER ABORTION RESOURCE

OTHER BOOKS IN THE UNRAVELED ROOTS SERIES

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Unraveled Roots for Women: 4 Causes of Damaging Behaviors
C. K. Gigon

C.K. Gigon is the collective pen name of the team at Support After Abortion, reflecting its values of compassion, collaboration, and capacity-building and honoring two leaders foundational to its beginnings.

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Unless otherwise indicated, names and identifying details in the stories and examples in this book have been changed or omitted to protect the privacy of those involved and of others referenced in their stories. Some stories are composite or representative narratives inspired by multiple real experiences; names and details in these stories are fictional. Stories based on real experiences reflect the perspectives and remembrances of the individuals involved and have not been independently verified.

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real women. real change.

Women who have worked through *Unraveled Roots* — on their own, with a mentor, or in a small group — share what the process has meant to them.

While doing the Unraveled Roots, I thought the chapter on codependency wouldn't apply to me. But as I worked through it, I thought, "This is me!" I definitely realized I have some work to do because I want to be the healthiest I can be.

Going through Unraveled Roots has been very eye opening. I became very aware of my roots and how they've negatively impacted many of my relationships. Now that I'm aware, my life is so much more clear. I can be free of unhealthy relationships and make my own decisions. I am worth it.

Unraveled Roots made me look closely at some of the habits and patterns I've had for years, a lot of which go back to childhood. It helped me process so much and even changed the way I interact with my family. It also brought me closer to God, which has been such a blessing in this whole journey.

I've gone through Unraveled Roots myself and with clients. I know it can be an essential tool for helping people break generational cycles and understand themselves and their decision making.

SUPPORT

AFTER ABORTION

Support After Abortion helps people impacted by abortion find hope and healing. Many who seek healing after abortion also carry deeper wounds—like abandonment, addiction, abuse, or codependency. That's why we created *Unraveled Roots*—to help uncover those underlying issues and begin building healthier patterns for the future.

Our *Unraveled Roots* series now supports people of all backgrounds and experiences in addressing the emotional and behavioral impact of these root issues.

Whether you're seeking support after abortion or trying to understand what's beneath your current struggles, we're here for you—no judgment, no pressure, just real support. We listen with compassion, share options, and help you find the kind of support that works best for you—one-on-one, in a group, with a counselor, or on your own. Religious or secular. Virtual or in person.

If you'd like to talk with someone, reach out to our After Abortion Line:

- Call or text 844.289.HOPE (4673)
- Email help@supportafterabortion.com
- Webchat at supportafterabortion.com

We also equip women and men with training and resources to walk alongside people who are struggling after abortion or working through root issues—offering compassion, confidence, and practical tools. **If you'd like to learn more about providing abortion healing support**, contact us at hello@supportafterabortion.com.

contents

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN | 7

CHAPTER ONE | 11
Why Am I Here?

CHAPTER TWO | 23
The Root of Abandonment

CHAPTER THREE | 43
The Root of Addiction

CHAPTER FOUR | 65
The Root of Abuse

CHAPTER FIVE | 87
The Root of Codependency

CHAPTER SIX | 111
Where Do I Grow Now?

RESOURCES | 130

SOURCE NOTES | 132

a note before you begin

Maybe you've sensed there's something deeper shaping your thoughts or behaviors but haven't quite known what it was. You might have picked up this book because you're ready to look at your past—especially the parts that still echo into your present. *Unraveled Roots* helps you look beneath the surface at the emotional wounds, coping behaviors, and patterns that may have taken root long ago, often in childhood.

As you work through *Unraveled Roots*, hard emotions or painful memories may come up. You might feel tense, irritable, distracted, foggy, numb, or like you just want to shut the book and walk away. That's okay. The goal isn't to push through. It's to notice what's happening and take it one step at a time.

It can help to have a few ways to steady yourself in those moments, like taking a few slow breaths, naming five things you can see around you, going for a walk, praying, writing down what you're feeling, reaching out to someone safe—any small thing that works for you.

How to Use This Book

You can work through these chapters in the way that fits your life best:

- **On your own:** You might prefer to read the chapters and work through the reflection questions privately and at your own pace. Watch a companion video series at unraveledroots.com/women to supplement your reading.
- **One-on-one:** You might choose to work through the book and share your story with a mentor, counselor, or coach who's there

to guide and encourage you. If you already work with a therapist, you could bring *Unraveled Roots* into those conversations—or work through it on your own and share as you go.

- **In a small group:** You may find that a small group offers a powerful sense of connection. Led by a trained facilitator, a group can give you space to listen, share, and grow alongside other women who are also working through their roots. There's something healing about hearing "me too." Encouragement, accountability, and fresh perspective can make a big difference.

Some women start one way and later try another. You might begin on your own and then decide to talk things through with someone. Or maybe you start in a group, and later want to revisit certain chapters by yourself. There's no one right way to do this—only what works for you.

If you'd like help finding one-on-one or group support, reach out at supportafterabortion.com or help@supportafterabortion.com.

Stories from Women Who Have Been There Too

Throughout these chapters, you'll find stories from other women. Some may feel like yours, others may feel foreign. We invite you to read them without judgment or comparison. Comparison can steal your peace, but hearing how another woman put words to feelings like yours can help you feel seen, understood, and less alone. It can help you look at your own story with a little more clarity and compassion.

Journaling

Writing down your thoughts, memories, and ideas can be a key part of your healing journey as you work through *Unraveled Roots*. Whether you like to write directly in this book, use a separate notebook, or keep

notes on your phone, getting your thoughts out of your head and onto a page is a powerful part of the process. As one option, we offer a free *Unraveled Roots* journal you can download by scanning this QR code.

A Note on Parents and the People Who Raised You

Throughout this book, we use the word "parent" to describe whoever raised you — whether that was a birth parent, grandparent, foster parent, guardian, or someone else. You'll know who that person is for you.

May your journey through Unraveled Roots
lead you to health and healing.

CHAPTER ONE

why am i here?

Most of us had dreams as girls. Some were loud and confident. Some were quiet—more like a longing than a plan. Maybe you shared yours with a best friend, scribbled them in a notebook, or kept them tucked away in your heart where no one could see. When you're young, life feels wide open. You can be anything.

And yet…

No girl ever dreams of becoming a woman addicted to drugs or alcohol, but it happens.

No girl dreams of being abused or staying in relationships that leave her feeling small, unsafe, or unseen—but it happens.

No girl ever dreams of abortion becoming part of her story, but it happens.

Many of us find ourselves living a life we never dreamed of. Sometimes those childhood dreams get snuffed out through a single terrible, violent act or at such a young age that we struggle to remember them. For others of us, our dreams are extinguished gradually, but heartbreakingly, through many disappointments and traumas over many years.

You want life to be different, but have no idea how to change it. You may doubt that change is even possible. But you're here because you're tired of the cycle. Tired of finding yourself in the same place over and over again. Maybe life feels like a continuous and lonely battle—it may feel like you're losing the fight. In fact, you may not be sure you have any fight left in you. Today, you only need to look at the step in front of you right now. And you have chosen to take that first step— with this book.

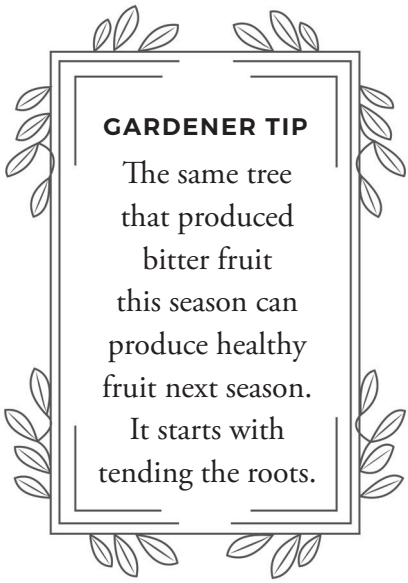
This Chapter is titled *Why Am I Here*? It's a good question. Maybe "How did I get here?" is the way you're asking it. Both questions are fair—and when you reach a point where something has to change, you start looking for real answers.

The path will lead, for a time, into childhood—traumas, pain, and memories of hurts—possibly even forgotten hurts. But the good news is that this is how healing happens. Tending to what's been wounded enables you to change and move forward.

Imagine a gardener who is growing a tree. In time, the tree begins to blossom and fruit begins to grow. One day, the gardener notices the fruit has spots and feels mushy. She bites into it and it doesn't taste good. She cuts off the bad fruit, hoping better fruit will grow. She sprays, fertilizes—trying to fix what she sees on the surface. However, when she goes out a few days later, new fruit has grown that is just as unhealthy. She begins to believe that growing good fruit is hopeless.

The "fruit" in our lives—our behaviors and patterns—often reflects deeper issues beneath the surface: our roots. But because we can't always see the roots, we tend to focus on the fruit—and we keep getting the same bitter harvest. You may have tried hard to stay in recovery, but can't seem to break free from your addiction. Maybe you've left an abusive relationship, only to choose another man who abuses you.

Or perhaps you promised yourself to never have another abortion, only to find yourself pregnant again and making the same choice.



Here's what we often miss: The "fruit" isn't the real problem—it's a symptom. Unhealthy fruit often is a sign of roots that are wounded, stressed, or damaged. *The roots feed the tree.* So, if the gardener tries to make the fruit better without treating the roots, the tree won't thrive, and she will be perpetually frustrated. Once the root problems are identified and addressed, the tree will gradually begin to produce good fruit.

Fruit From the Family Tree

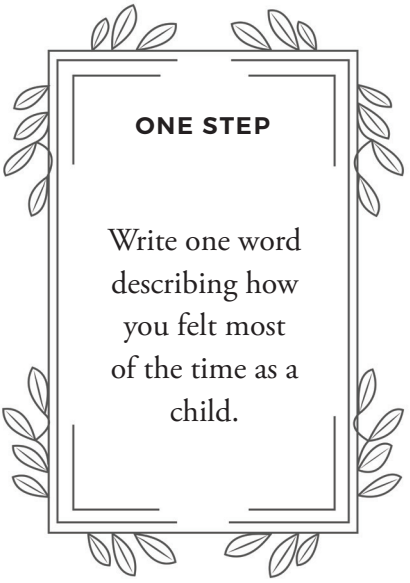
Often, we can understand some of the "why" behind our choices and behaviors when we take a closer look at what we experienced growing up—and the patterns that shaped the people who raised us.

Imagine a girl who grows up in a home where love feels conditional or unpredictable. Maybe a parent is absent, emotionally unavailable, or caught up in their own struggles. Maybe the home looks "fine" from the outside, but behind closed doors there is criticism, control, manipulation, addiction, or abuse. She learns to adapt. She learns what to say, what not to say, what to hide, and what to tolerate. She learns how to survive.

Then she becomes an adult. And even if she desperately wants something different, those early lessons can follow her into relationships.

She may find herself drawn to people who feel familiar—even when they aren't safe. She may settle for crumbs of affection because a deeper message is running in the background: *This is all I can expect. This is what love looks like. This is what I deserve.*

Those old messages can spill into her choices and behaviors in all kinds of areas—work, friendships, parenting, money, substances, food, and more. They can influence her coping habits, boundaries, self-worth, and the ways she manages pain or responds when she feels anxious, lonely, or unsafe.



This book will help you examine your behaviors and relate them to the generations before you. You'll start to identify hidden patterns, behaviors, and significant events from past generations that may be impacting you today.

The bottom line is that many of our patterns were shaped in childhood. We likely weren't equipped back then to name what was happening, protect ourselves, or choose differently. Sometimes the people who influenced us did real harm on purpose. Often, they may have acted out of their own unresolved pain and patterns. That doesn't excuse what happened—but it can help explain why these cycles run so deep.

And here's the hope: what happened to you as a child is not the end of your story. You can begin to recognize your own behaviors and patterns and choose healthier ones—one step at a time.

Unhealthy behaviors can feel normal simply because they're famil-

iar. We may not even realize how damaging they are until we slow down and look beneath the surface. But when we begin to uncover the roots beneath our behaviors, we step out of the dark—and onto a new, life-giving path.

Let's look at one woman's story of the impact generational trauma had on her behaviors and relationships:

> *It took me a long time to connect the dots—between my struggles as an adult, my childhood, and my family roots. Growing up, my family seemed normal and loving. My mom's quirky, fun personality kept life interesting. But so often, I longed for her to be dependable. To be steady. To be in control. Something felt "off," and I resented how unpredictable she was.*
>
> *I knew I was loved, but I felt lonely as a kid. There was an emotional distance with my mom that I couldn't seem to bridge—no matter how hard I tried. And my dad was there—but not there. My parents just weren't emotionally present—for each other or for us.*
>
> *Home felt…uncomfortable. I coped by trying to be the "good girl." Performance and people-pleasing became my "drugs" of choice. I was looking to fill that deep need for stability… value… love… and acceptance.*
>
> *Much later, I learned more about my mom's childhood and how all the losses she experienced and the guilt she felt impacted her. It didn't excuse things, but it did help me understand why she was the way she was.*
>
> *Her parents married young and got pregnant right away. Because of financial and family pressures, my grandma had an abortion. A few years later—soon after my mom was born—they divorced.*
>
> *Then her mom died suddenly from a surgery complication when my*

mom was only six. Her dad drifted and was in and out of her life after that. So my mom was raised by relatives, but they made sure she never forgot what it "cost" them. They controlled and manipulated her. She grew up feeling guilty and like she owed them… just for existing.

My mom carried all of that into adulthood—and into our family. Turns out she was lonely, too. I think she wanted to connect with us, but just didn't know how. Plus, her relatives still had a hold on her. I think they made her feel like being close with us meant she was choosing us over them.

IN HER WORDS

"I wasn't just a random mess — I was part of a cycle that started long before I was even born."
- Melinda

When I was an adult, mom was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I'm not sure knowing that would have made a difference to me as a kid. I just knew home didn't feel steady.

When I got married, I repeated a lot of the patterns I saw growing up. It looked a little different, but parenting and connecting with my children were so much harder than I ever dreamed they would be. My marriage hit a long, difficult season. I wanted a happy family. I wanted things to be better. But I didn't know how. Everything I tried seemed to fail.

That's when I started feeling more compassion for my mom—and I began to see the roots. In her. In me. And finally… gradually… I began to let go of my need to work to feel loved, to control and fix everyone.

> *And God began to patiently and lovingly show me a better way. New choices. New patterns. Ones that fit the way He made me. I felt him speak to my heart, "You aren't who you were then. You don't have to react the same way. It can be different. You don't have to be afraid."*
>
> *Healing has come in layers for me. Each healthier choice has made me stronger than I used to be. The pain of the past isn't gone, but it doesn't define me anymore. I am worthy.*
>
> *- Melinda*

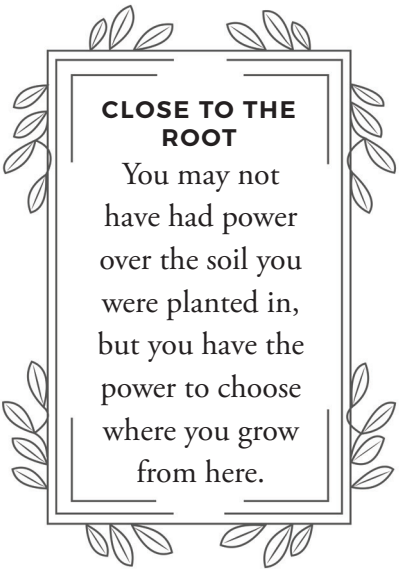
We often think of these patterns as behaviors we simply picked up from those around us, but modern science suggests the connection goes even deeper. It isn't just in our memories— it may be in our very "wiring." Scientists in Switzerland studied how the emotional trauma of parents can actually change the biology of their children and their children's children. Their findings support the idea that the stresses our parents faced—and their resulting behaviors—can affect us on a much deeper, biological level than previously realized.[1]

This means that the "roots" we are unraveling may be a biological response to the environment we were born into. This internal "wiring" can show up as a constant sense of insecurity in abandonment, a vulnerability to the "highs" of addiction, hyper-vigilance in abuse, or over-functioning in codependency. This science can help explain why your struggles feel so deep, yet just as our brains can be wired for survival, they can also be re-wired for healing.

Awareness is where change begins. As you identify your roots and choose healthier behaviors, you are actually helping your nervous system learn that it is finally safe. You may not have had power over the "soil" you were planted in, but you have the power to choose where you grow from here.

There is a Reason Why You Are Here

There *is* a reason you are in *this* place, reading *this* book during *this* time in your life, hoping and searching for answers and solutions. Your upbringing and experiences may have conditioned you, normalizing and solidifying behaviors and unhealthy choices—but it's never too late to walk a new path.



Throughout this journey, you'll work through that question, "Why am I here?" in more ways than one. Part of the answer will be practical: understanding the patterns that shaped you so you can make healthier choices. But there's also a deeper truth: your life has meaning and you were created for a purpose that only you can fulfill. Working through *Unraveled Roots*, can help you discover, grow, and walk out your purpose.

In the chapters ahead, you'll explore four common roots of damaging behaviors and painful patterns: abandonment, addiction, abuse, and codependency. You'll also read authentic stories that illustrate these roots.

Go at a pace that feels right for you. If a section or question feels too big, skip it for now and circle back later. You don't have to rush healing.

Write down what stands out, what stirs up questions, and what you want to revisit later—on your own or with someone safe.

You may not relate to every root in this book—and that's okay. You

may recognize some immediately—or you may see connections you haven't before or insights that help you better understand yourself or someone in your life.

That understanding is the ground work needed so you can heal, rebuild what was wounded, create healthier patterns, and move forward with freedom and strength.

There *is* hope. Change *is* possible. Life *can be* different.

Digging Deeper

1. What brought you to this book? What weight are you hoping to set down? (You'll look back on this question and your answer in Chapter 6 as you are finishing this book.)

2. This chapter touched on our childhood dreams. When you were young, what did you imagine or hope your adult life would look like?

Prayer

Lord, You see my whole story—the parts I understand and the parts I don't. You know what brought me here. Where I've felt lost, ashamed, confused, or unsure of my purpose—meet me there. Help me believe that my life is not random or wasted. Give me courage to look honestly at where I've been—and hope for where I'm going. Open my eyes to the patterns shaping my behaviors and give me the strength to begin untangling the unhealthy roots. I don't have to see the whole road ahead today. Just help me take the next step. Jesus, I trust in You. Amen.

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalm 147:3 (NIV)

CHAPTER TWO

the root of abandonment

Young fruit trees are vulnerable. Careful attention is needed to make sure the tree has the proper balance of sunlight, water, and other nutrients. Vigilance is vital to nourish and protect it from pests and disease so it can grow to produce healthy, vibrant fruit. Different kinds of trees require different levels and types of nurturing, but they have one element in common: Their growth can't be left to chance. Tiny trees need a lot of love and attention to flourish.

Young children are much the same way. Each of us requires a different and unique balance of care, support, and nurturing. But the common thread is this: We all need love, security, and connection to thrive. The very first connection that we're designed to make is with our parents. When that bond is healthy and close, it establishes a security in us as children that we are likely to carry into adulthood. It sets a model and foundation for forming stable and emotionally life-giving relationships and attachments as we grow. Secure attachment to our parent(s) helps provide a positive view of ourselves and gives us the confidence to branch out and explore the world around us.[1] We are also often more likely to be drawn to and form relationships with others who exhibit those same loving and beneficial qualities.

However, the opposite is also true. When that bond is damaged, unhealthy, or non-existent, we can often unconsciously carry the effects of that void into adulthood. The fruit of the root of abandonment—and the low self-worth that frequently results—may look like a reluctance to commit to relationships because of fear of rejection. Or, we may find ourselves engaging in unhealthy attachments and behaviors in order to numb the pain and fill the internal or external sense of emptiness and loss.

The Absence of a Parent or Caretaker

When we think of abandonment, the first image that usually comes to mind is someone physically leaving. But one of the definitions of "abandon," according to Merriam-Webster, is "to withdraw protection, support, or help from."[2] That opens the door a little wider—because abandonment can happen in a lot of ways. Maybe it was through divorce, death, chronic illness, addiction, incarceration, foster care, or adoption. Sometimes it's a revolving-door presence that never feels steady. And sometimes, painfully, one or both parents were physically presentbut emotionally absent or unreliable. No matter how it happened—or who tried to fill the gap afterward—the loss can feel the same: a missing anchor.

CLOSE TO THE ROOT

Abandonment doesn't always look like someone leaving. Sometimes it looks like someone staying—but never really showing up. Both leave an empty space in your heart.

The remaining parent or caregiver may have done the very best they could, and that matters. Yet, we can still feel like we're reaching into empty

space. Over time, that kind of absence can affect mental and physical health in ways that add up across the years.[3] It doesn't always show up as one obvious symptom. Sometimes it looks like working hard to be noticed or chosen. Sometimes it looks like shrinking—staying low-maintenance, not needing much, handling everything alone. It can mean looking outside the family for connection, which can help or harm us, depending on who we attach to. Whatever we learn about love or its absence—and however we learn to cope with that empty space—research has consistently shown that we likely take those emotional and behavioral patterns from our early years into our relationships.[4]

GARDENER TIP

A young tree that doesn't receive consistent water develops roots that stay close to the surface. It survives — but it becomes vulnerable in ways that aren't visible until a storm hits. What shows up later often traces back to what was missing early.

As an adult, you might notice the absence echoing in ways you never connected to your childhood. You may feel drawn to what's familiar even when it isn't healthy—like manipulative, controlling, or otherwise painful relationships that somehow feel normal. You might mistake intensity or attention for love. You may second-guess yourself, blame yourself quickly, fear rejection, work hard to please others, or struggle to trust your own instincts—letting other people decide what's real or what matters.[5] Parental or caregiver absence can also lead to anxiety, depression, addictions, suicidal ideation, self-harm, eating disorders, risky sexual behaviors, and other mental health issues.[6]

None of this is about blaming a parent. It's about understanding what your younger self had to make sense of, and what you might still be carrying without even realizing it.

If your father was absent — physically or emotionally

For many of us, a father is one of our earliest experiences of protection, affirmation, and steadiness. When he's not around, disconnected, or inconsistent, it can leave questions that linger under the surface: *Am I worth staying for? Can I trust men? Do I have to perform to be chosen?* This ache can show up later as people-pleasing, fear of rejection, or seeking male closeness and validation, often through dating and sex. That's one reason studies have found strong links between father absence and earlier sexual activity and higher risk of teen pregnancy.[7]

If your mother was absent — physically or emotionally

A mother is often our first safe place to land—and, as girls, one of our earliest mirrors for self-worth, emotional security, and what love looks like up close. When that presence is missing or isn't steady, some of us learn early to shut down our own needs, become the caretaker, stay invisible, or become low-maintenance so we don't risk being a burden. A mother's emotional unavailability can leave us with a chronic sense of emptiness and a low sense of self-worth. In adulthood, that can look like being capable on the outside while feeling under-nurtured, overly self-critical, or unsure how to receive care without guilt.[8] It can also show up as difficulty trusting closeness, struggling with boundaries, or repeating familiar dynamics in adult relationships.[9]

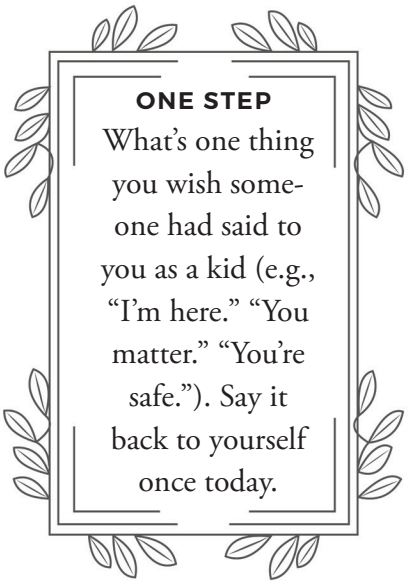
Whether it was a father's or a mother's warmth and affection that was missing—or both—underneath all of it is a girl trying to meet a need that was never filled. Most of us found ways to cope, to adapt, to keep reaching. And understanding where that reaching comes from is where healing starts.

Sound Familiar?

When you think about your parents, how seen, heard, and supported did you feel?

Alone in the Forest

Have you ever been in a crowd of people and felt lonely? Misunderstood? Or simply invisible? We likely all have at one time or another. But perhaps some of us felt that for most of our childhood. Parents or other caregivers were physically present. Our basic needs for food and shelter were met. They may have told us they loved us, showed up for events, and even helped us go to college. By all external appearances, they were "involved" parents. Yet, despite all that, we didn't feel emotionally *connected*. We didn't feel loved.



This can happen for many different reasons. Many people describe their feelings and experiences of abandonment like:

- We believed our feelings, needs, opinions, or accomplishments weren't acceptable, recognized, or valued.
- Home didn't feel like a safe place to push boundaries or make mistakes.
- We experienced verbal or emotional abuse.

- Our parent(s) or caregivers withheld love, affection, or approval.
- We were held to unwavering, impossible expectations that we could never meet no matter how hard we tried.
- We suffered physical and/or sexual abuse.
- We were raised by a parent or caregiver who struggled with mental health issues like depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder.
- We were raised by a parent who had an addiction such as alcohol or gambling.

This isn't an exhaustive list. And we might have never recognized some of these experiences as "abandonment." It may have just felt like an internal gnawing or profound sense of insecurity, disconnect, and loneliness that we couldn't quite identify. The truth is that a caretaker can supply all the basics we need to survive without providing the full heart involvement we need to thrive. *Knowing* we're loved in our heads and *feeling* we're loved in our hearts are two very different things.

The behaviors we developed along the way are usually about getting through the moment—ways to escape, shut down, or push through—rather than healthy ways to deal with the world. Over time these coping strategies can become patterns that keep us stuck instead of moving us toward healing—until we start choosing something different.

Sound Familiar?

Growing up, did you ever feel physically cared for but emotionally unseen? What was that like for you?

Unravel the Root: Michelle's Truth Story

Now let's identify and unravel the signs of abandonment in a real-life story. As you read, consider that we tend to model what we've observed growing up or make unhealthy choices to cope with the wounds resulting from the root cause.

The details of Michelle's life will not exactly match yours. The goal is not to *compare* your experience to hers. Rather, see if you can *relate* to the loneliness, emotions, and other generational elements that may have been present in your own personal story.

> *I didn't go to therapy because I wanted to. I went because I had run out of other options. I had hit rock bottom, and I knew if I kept living the way I was, I was probably going to die. My life since I was a teen was full of drugs, reckless choices, and toxic relationships. Truly, I was a mess. And I couldn't understand why.*
>
> *I used to say I came from the "perfect family." We had a nice house in the suburbs. My parents never missed a school event. We went on great vacations. My siblings all turned out fine—successful, stable, put-together. But me? I was the train wreck who didn't fit in. I used to think something was just wrong with me.*
>
> *But when I started going to therapy, some things I had never really seen before started to make sense. Like the fact that my parents didn't even share a room. They lived in different parts of the house. My dad had a ton of health issues and was always on pain meds. I thought that's just what he had to do to cope and never questioned it.*
>
> *Our family looked fine from the outside, but inside, it was lonely. We didn't eat meals together. I spent a lot of time by myself after school. Since my dad couldn't work, my mom worked all the time to keep us going financially. Dad mostly stayed in his room. When he did come*

out, he was distant and moody. I never felt close to him. He always seemed irritated with me—like I was a burden.

In therapy, I realized my dad had been addicted to pain meds, and everything in our house revolved around that, even if no one said it out loud. And my mom? Well, she probably poured herself into work because she didn't get the love and support she needed at home. It felt like she was always trying to prove her worth to everyone else—but not paying attention to what was happening inside our house—inside our family.

It never felt like there was space or time for me or my problems. Even when I was sexually assaulted, and I really wanted my parents' help and comfort, I didn't tell them. I just stuffed the pain down and kept going.

I spent most of my life trying to fill that loneliness—that feeling like no one was there for me. I was still a teenager when I met a guy who made me feel wanted, like I finally mattered. I moved in with him, thinking it was love. It wasn't. It was the beginning of a dark spiral into drugs and alcohol. He didn't love me—he used me. But I stayed because, honestly, I didn't know what real love or safety looked like.

Looking back now, I see how much abandonment shaped me. Not the kind where someone physically leaves you, but the kind where the people who are supposed to show up for you emotionally just… don't.

I've also realized that my parents were repeating patterns from their own childhoods. My dad's parents divorced when he was little. And even though his dad would visit, he never got close to his kids—he was stiff and distant. My mom's side was strained too. Her dad was addicted to alcohol and couldn't hold a job, which left my grandma working herself to the bone—just like my mom. Knowing their history doesn't make the way they treated me okay, but it does help me see that I wasn't just a random mess. I was part of a cycle that started

long before I was even born.

Even then, for a long time, I wondered—why me? Why did I fall apart when my siblings seemed to keep it together? But therapy helped me understand that we all respond to pain differently. My siblings had their own ways of coping. Mine just happened to be more obvious—and more destructive.

Healing hasn't been easy, but it started by telling the truth about my story.

—Michelle

IN HER WORDS

"Healing hasn't been easy, but it started by telling the truth about my story."
- Michelle

Digging Deeper

We've talked about how abandonment roots can develop and lead to damaging behaviors. Michelle's story showed what that can look like in real life. Now let's reflect and connect the dots to your own story, one step at a time.

Here's the process we'll follow:

- State the **Facts**.
- Expose the **Lies**.
- Acknowledge the **Behaviors**.
- Embrace the **Truths**.
- **Change** the behaviors.

Let's walk through this process step-by-step. We'll start each step by looking at Michelle's story. Then we'll guide you in working through your own story.

State the Facts

Even though Michelle's family looked "perfect" from the outside, the reality inside was very different. With her father addicted to pain meds and her mother focused on work, Michelle grew up in a home where her parents were physically present but emotionally absent. They were also separated from one another—sleeping in different rooms. Michelle felt invisible and like a burden to them, creating a sense of isolation so deep that she didn't feel safe enough to share the trauma of her sexual assault.

1. What similarities do you see between Michelle's upbringing and the **facts** of your own childhood? Differences?

2. How can you relate to Michelle's feelings even if your **facts** are different?

3. Did you experience any type of abandonment—physical or emotional—growing up? If you did, name the **facts** of your root of abandonment story.

Expose the Lies

Michelle believed she was an inconvenience to those she loved and unworthy of attention and protection. She believed something was wrong with her. And eventually, she began to believe that being "used" by someone was the closest thing to being "wanted" she would ever find.

4. If you experienced any type of abandonment as a child, what **lies** did you believe about yourself based on those facts of your childhood?

Acknowledge the Behaviors

Michelle pushed down her feelings and kept silent about her struggles. She tried to fill the void with a guy who made her feel wanted, staying even though it was a toxic relationship. She turned to drugs and alcohol to numb the loneliness and pain of not feeling loved or valued.

5. Considering Michelle's story and how she coped with her abandonment roots, what **behaviors** in your life are similar? Different?

Embrace the Truths

Through counseling, Michelle began to separate what happened *to her* from what it meant *about her*. She came to realize that her needs were valid and she was worthy of love, attention, and protection. She also began to recognize that her parents were carrying their own unresolved wounds—and those patterns shaped the home she grew up in. She was able to see that her behaviors and choices were unhealthy and damaging—and did not bring her the love, stability, and connection she longed for.

6. Like Michelle, you may have lived under the weight of lies you believed about yourself based on the facts of your story. What **truths** are you choosing to believe about yourself today to replace the lies that grew from the root of abandonment?

Change the Behaviors

Hitting rock bottom caused Michelle to start prioritizing her healing. She stopped burying her past and emotions. She did the hard work of examining her behaviors, dealing with her feelings, and making changes. She stepped away from drugs, alcohol, and harmful relationships. She began setting boundaries to protect herself from being used. Michelle started building her identity and life based on her true value instead of her old pain.

7. What unhealthy behaviors rooted in abandonment have you identified and want to **change**?

8. How are you going to respond differently when you are triggered to believe those lies about yourself that often lead you to turn to unhealthy behaviors because of your roots of abandonment? *(Example: When my boyfriend doesn't make time for me, I feel unimportant and tell myself, "I don't matter, I'm not good enough." Then I usually drink to numb the pain and try to feel better about myself. Instead, I am going to pause, name what I'm feeling, and choose something that actually helps, like text a supportive friend, take a walk, pray, or do something I enjoy that grounds me.)*

Choosing a New Path

It can be freeing to realize you can move forward and start a new chapter in your story—even if the people who hurt you never acknowledge it or express remorse.

While the root of abandonment may look different for each of us, the lies we believe about ourselves often sound familiar: *I'm not loved. I'm not enough. I'll never measure up. I'm not worthy.*

Those messages can be loud and destructive. And they do more than hurt. They shape how you connect with people—what you tolerate, what you chase or cling to, what you avoid, and what feels "normal."

But those messages are lies. The truth is: *You are valuable. Your life matters. You have purpose. You are worth showing up for. You deserve love.*

As you take small steps that reflect that truth, the connections you long for can start to feel possible—not perfect relationships overnight, but real moments of safety, honesty, and support with God, with yourself, and with safe people.

If this chapter brought up anything you want to process further, you don't have to carry it alone. A trusted mentor, support group, or counselor can help—and the Resources section at the back of this book offers options to help you find the type of support you may desire.

One small step at a time, new patterns really can take root—and life can start to feel different.

Keep Growing! A Seed of Encouragement

— from a former Support After Abortion client

> *My parents divorced when I was so little that I don't even remember them together. My dad stayed involved for a while. He showed up. He was around. But then—when I was in elementary school—he just vanished. I didn't know why. I learned later he had an addiction—he'd been in recovery, but relapsed and disappeared from our*

lives. But back then, I just knew he was gone and it hurt. His sudden absence left a huge hole in my heart.

I also struggled to connect with my mom. She worked constantly. I know she was trying to keep everything together… but, for me, she just felt far away. So I grew up starving for love and attention.

At first, I tried to earn it by being "the good girl." The good kid. The one who did everything right and didn't cause problems. But when that didn't make a difference, I swung the other way. I became "the rebel."

I found a group of kids who accepted me—no questions asked. And not long after I turned 13, I started becoming sexually active because… honestly? I wanted to feel wanted…loved.

As I got older, my relationship with my mom got more tense. More complicated. And I just wanted out. So I left home in my early teens.

By my late teens, I had a child—and I'd had two abortions. At the time, I didn't look back or feel regret. It seemed the best choice at the time. The only choice. I married my daughter's father, but we divorced soon after.

Looking back, I think I wanted to make up for losing my dad. I think part of me kept trying to create a relationship with a man that would bring a different, happier ending.

I eventually married the man who is now my husband. But I was still repeating so many old patterns. And I started seeing it spill into my parenting. I could tell I was shaping how my kids saw themselves. And I could see the damaging behaviors they were developing.

That's when I started wondering: Why am I like this? Why do I keep doing this?

I started making small changes—letting go of some unhealthy habits, learning boundaries, getting honest about what I felt.

But I also realized I couldn't do it alone, that sheer willpower would only get me so far. I needed more support.

That's when I started going to church and, for the first time, building a real relationship with God. I slowly began to experience the unchanging love of God and believe that he is truly there for me.

As I got healthier, I got a new job where I counseled women recovering from trauma. One day, when a co-worker described a client's abortion experience, it stopped me cold. For the first time, I was struck by how my own abortions had impacted my life. It was a turning point.

Eventually, I went through an abortion healing program through Support After Abortion. It was a big part of my healing. And one of the most meaningful moments was when my husband came to the final session with me—and we grieved my abortions together.

What keeps me healing and growing is seeing the difference it makes—in my marriage and with my kids.

I'm learning how to be honest. How to say, "I'm sorry." How to ask for forgiveness when I need to. And slowly, we're building something new. Something healthier. And now I'm setting a healthier pattern for them to follow and hopefully pass down to their children some day.

Seeds to Carry Forward

One line that stood out to me…

One hopeful truth I want to remember…

One small step I can take this week…

Prayer

God, you know the wounds I've carried. I ask for and trust You to give me peace and healing. I bring You the places in me that still feel unwanted or unseen. Speak truth where abandonment cut deep and left lies I believed about myself in its wake. Help me receive Your steady love. Give me courage to choose what's healthy and to reach for support when I need it. Thank You that healing is possible. Amen.

Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.

Psalm 27:10 (NIV)

CHAPTER THREE

the root of addiction

Few living things are more exposed to the elements than trees. Out in the open, they experience a fierce combination of wind, rain, sleet, snow, and blazing heat. Yet despite it all, mature trees stand strong due to their natural ability to adapt. Harsh conditions actually cause them to grow even stronger.

People, on the other hand, have more difficulty weathering the unpredictable, constantly changing seasons of life. We don't automatically know our strength, value, and purpose in life. It takes time, loving guidance, and experience for us to know who we are and how to handle challenging people and changing circumstances. From the time we're born, we look to our parents or caregivers to answer some important questions for us: *Am I valuable? How do I respond when life gets stressful? How do I form friendships and relationships?*

Parents who struggle with substance or behavior addictions model unhealthy and damaging ways for their children to feel good about themselves, cope with disappointments, and build relationships. They reach for drugs, sex, food, or other things to make them feel happy, loved, in control—or at least to numb their pain. In doing so, their method of escaping pain may have inflicted pain on you. It may have

left you exposed to life's difficulties without healthy tools to help you learn, adapt, and grow stronger. As a result, you may have also developed addictive behaviors.

GARDENER TIP

In harsh conditions, a tree's growth rings show the strain — narrower, compressed. But after drought or damage, the rings widen again. The same wood holds both the hard seasons and the healing.

Understanding the "High"

No one ever sets out to become addicted. Often it begins with a desire for temporary pleasure, escape from reality, or as a way to numb feelings or dull pain. However it starts, addiction can set in and lead us down paths we never intended to walk.

Some people can engage in the same activities or behaviors without ever becoming addicted. However, because of a variety of factors, other people are more vulnerable to becoming increasingly dependent on substances or behaviors in order to cope and function.

To understand why these patterns are so hard to break, we have to look at what is happening beneath the surface—both in our minds and our bodies. Research shows that addiction to substances (often referred to as substance use disorder) can literally change the wiring in a person's brain over time. It causes intense cravings and both psychological and physical dependence. And with continued use, tolerance builds—so it takes more and more of the substance to get the same effect. It becomes a vicious cycle.[1]

While we typically think of drugs or alcohol, the reality is that addiction shows up in all sorts of ways. In this chapter we'll explore

some of the most common substance and behavioral addictions—and what growing up around them may have meant for you. The key is this: whether the addiction was a substance (like alcohol or drugs) or a behavior (like gambling, porn, or compulsive spending), growing up around it can leave similar wounds—and similar patterns to unravel.

Substance Addictions

Substance misuse covers a wide range of "things" that can be used to alter mood or numb feelings — alcohol, illegal drugs, prescription medications, even everyday household products used in harmful ways.[2] Here's a short list of substances people can become addicted to:[3]

- Alcohol
- Marijuana
- PCP, LSD and other hallucinogens
- Inhalants (like paint thinners and glue)
- Opioid pain killers
- Sedatives, hypnotics and medications for anxiety
- Cocaine
- Methamphetamine
- Tobacco
- Sugar[4]
- Food[5]

What they have in common is that they become a way to escape, cope, or feel something different than what's real.

A person who misuses substances may not always act or look the way we might expect. Many with active and damaging addictions hold full-time jobs, pay the bills on time, and engage reasonably well with family, friends, and the outside world. Maybe that's what you witnessed growing up. Things looked "normal" on the outside, but you sensed something was off—even if you couldn't name it. Stability and trust can erode quickly in those circumstances. Something doesn't add up. You're told you're loved, but you don't feel it. You may have felt overlooked, invisible, or unimportant.

Maybe no one ever talked about it.[6] Maybe you tried to ask questions, but were dismissed or made to feel like your feelings or questions were unreasonable, disloyal, or simply wrong. You may have been told that what you were seeing, feeling, or sensing wasn't true. It may have been too painful for your parent without addiction to talk about the parent with addiction. Over time, you may have stopped trusting that voice inside of you—the one telling you what's right or wrong.

Even if the problem was too obvious to ignore, you may have been told not to tell, leaving you with no place to process your pain and emotions.

Instead of your parent having an addiction, maybe it was a sibling or other close family member whose addiction struggles consumed your parents' attention, leaving you feeling unseen or without the guidance, recognition, and support you needed.

Growing up with a parent or caregiver who misused substances carries its own lasting weight. It raises your risk of developing alcohol or drug use disorder yourself by young adulthood.[7] It can also show up in you as depression, anxiety, relationship issues, emotional numbness, or difficulty regulating eating, sexual, or spending behaviors. You may not have considered that these unhealthy ways of coping with pain

could be connected to what happened at home.[8]

Behavioral Addictions

Addiction isn't limited to substances. Many people become addicted to behaviors in their often subconscious search for the same effects that those who use substances seek. Just as with substance misuse, these addictive behaviors can produce negative results in work and school performance and personal relationships.[9] In many cases the dependence negatively impacts the person's mental, physical and emotional health in the same way as substance use disorder.

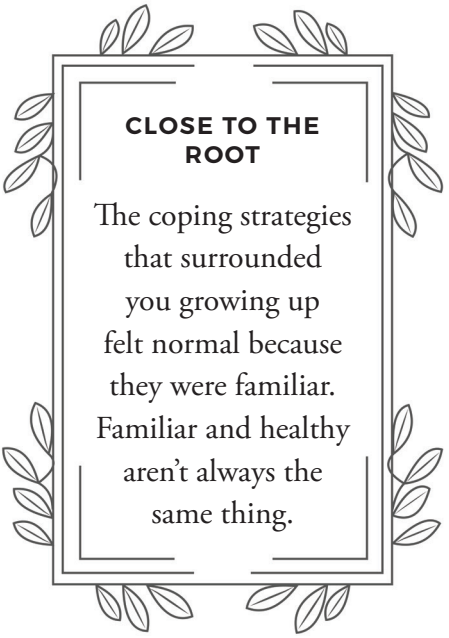
Growing Recognition of Addictive Behaviors

The list of diagnoses for behavioral addictions is expanding. One example is gambling disorder. In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)—the standard diagnostic guide for mental health professionals—reclassified gambling from an "impulse control disorder" to a "substance-related and addictive disorders" category.[10] This decision was a formal recognition that *a behavior* can activate the brain's "wiring" and reward system in the same way as drugs or alcohol.

Moving gambling into the addiction category opened the door for other behaviors to be viewed in the same way. More and more mental health professionals are recognizing a growing number and variety of behaviors that can also become addictions, including:[11]

- Shopping
- Pornography
- Sex
- Exercise

- Work
- Video games
- Internet
- Social Media[12]
- Cell phones[13]
- Religion[14]
- Self harm (e.g. cutting,)[15]



Recognizing the Pattern

Addiction, whether it is to a substance or a behavior, often shows up in similar ways. Common signs include:[16]

- Engaging compulsively, excessively, and repeatedly in a risky behavior or activity
- Finding it very hard or impossible to stay away from the activity
- Losing control over the behavior once it starts
- Demonstrating impaired judgment or poor decision-making
- Craving the activity or behavior
- Being unable to recognize the consequences of the behavior (safety, financial, emotional, physical)
- Straining work and personal relationships
- Reacting with inappropriate emotions that don't fit a situation

Sound Familiar?

Did you grow up in a home where coping meant escaping? Whether it was through substances or specific behaviors, take a moment to notice how you may have seen addiction modeled as a way to cope.

Sex and Pornography

Healthy, intimate relationships are not just about sex. They also involve our thoughts and emotions. Healthy relationships are difficult at times, but they're built on respect, honesty, and genuine care for one another. When we are exposed to sexual behaviors, sexual addiction, infidelity, or pornography—whether from parents, siblings, or others—it can shape how we see ourselves, how we connect with others, and what we expect from sex and love.

Sex

Sex was designed to be pleasurable and unifying, but like any good thing, it can be misused. Compulsive sexual behaviors—sometimes called sexual addictions—can become a person's focus and cause harm to their relationships, work, or well-being. It might look like compulsive masturbation, excessive use of pornography, or engaging in high-risk activities like numerous sexual partners, group sex, or paying for sex.[17] Addiction to sexual activities can stem from a desire for excitement or the "forbidden fruit"—a person or experience that feels off-limits or out of reach.

Sexual addiction can involve infidelity. Not every act of infidelity is the result of a sexual addiction, yet the patterns of secrecy and betrayal often feel the same to those left in the wake—and can shatter a child's confidence in their parents. As children, we tend to assume there is a foundation of honesty between our parents. We may begin to wonder,

If my parents weren't honest with each other, how can I know they're being honest with me? We may begin to doubt if we can really trust the foundation of our relationships: *I thought my parents' relationship was real, but look what happened. I was wrong. What and who can I trust?* We may end up lowering our expectations of friends and spouses, whether we realize it or not.[18]

If your parent, caregiver, or someone else around you was addicted to sex or you were exposed to sexual behaviors as a child, you may have developed a cynical view of marriage and relationships. You may believe that honesty and long-term commitment aren't possible, normal, desirable, or to be expected. Even if you deeply desire a healthy, long-term relationship, knowing what to look for—or how to build one—may feel like a mystery because you never saw it modeled.

Pornography

The dramatic rise in how easy it is to access pornography and sexually explicit materials and images seems to be pushing our understanding of sex further away from its healthy state. At its core, pornography is the depiction of erotic behavior—through videos, pictures, or writing—specifically intended to create sexual excitement.[19] But it is a carefully constructed fantasy, and no person or relationship can live up to the expectations it sets. It simply isn't real.

Pornography isn't about knowing or valuing the other person. It reduces women and men to objects for sexual gratification rather than seeing them as living, breathing humans with their own feelings, histories, wants, and needs. Pornography can cause women to feel like they must compete with pornography or "perform" to be desirable or keep a partner's interest.

Like other behaviors we've discussed, many people turn to pornography to escape boredom, loneliness, anxiety, and other painful

emotions. The temporary "feel-good" dopamine rush it may provide can make negative feelings easier to ignore—at least for a little while.[20] Regular consumption of pornography can become addictive. And when that happens, it has been shown to change the brain in ways similar to what happens in people addicted to cocaine, alcohol, and methamphetamines.[21]

When children are exposed to sexual content or pornography, the impact can be profound and lasting. The images and ideas presented can create unrealistic expectations about sex, performance, and body image that can be deeply confusing and difficult for a developing mind to process. This early exposure can shape a child's values, attitudes, and behaviors toward sex and relationships.[22] And studies have linked pornography exposure and use among children and adolescents to higher rates of depression, anxiety, acting out and violent behavior, early sexual activity, multiple sex partners, sexual violence, and distorted views of relationships between women and men.[23]

If pornography was part of your childhood—in your home, online, or elsewhere—you may have absorbed damaging messages about your body, your worth, and what you need to do to be wanted. You may have learned to see yourself through that filter without ever realizing it—and carried those beliefs quietly into your relationships, wondering why real intimacy feels so elusive.

Food Addiction

Food is one of our most basic needs. It keeps us alive, and it can also be comforting and enjoyable. But for some people, food becomes more—it turns into a way to numb pain, soothe stress, or feel a sense of control when life feels overwhelming or uncertain.

People name these struggles in different ways: food addiction, disordered eating, or eating disorders. But the common thread for

many people is that eating or controlling food becomes a way to cope.

And when our parents regularly overeat, restrict, binge, or purge, we can grow up absorbing unhealthy messages about food, bodies, and self-worth. We can also learn—whether or not it's ever said out loud—that eating or controlling food is what comforts you when you feel disappointed, lonely, angry, anxious, or other hard emotions.

Tension and behaviors around food can also develop from comments and pressure about your weight and appearance. Maybe a parent or caregiver tried to control what you ate, criticized your body, or sent the message that you needed to look a certain way to be good enough or to receive their approval.

And sometimes, it's not the family—or not only the family. Peers and culture can add pressure: unrealistic body ideals, comparisons, and harsh judgments about bodies and beauty.

For many women, these messages don't just sting in the moment; they become lies you believe—shaping your self-worth, eating behaviors and attitudes, and how you cope with stress or pain.

And when you internalize negative images about your body, it can lead to feelings of shame, anxiety, self-consciousness, depression, isolation, low self-esteem—and unhealthy eating behaviors or disorders.[24]

Sound Familiar?

As you think back, describe any patterns of substance or behavioral addictions you saw in your parents or others around you as you grew up. How have you seen those patterns play out in your own life?

Why Do I Have an Addiction?

Being exposed to addiction as a child can affect us in profound

ONE STEP

Think back to a time that felt heavy for you. Take a deep breath. As you slowly exhale, acknowledge: That was a lot to carry.

ways, including developing addiction(s) ourselves. But maybe you're thinking, *Addiction wasn't present in my home. Why am I struggling with it?* You don't have to have a parent or caregiver with an addiction to be vulnerable to addiction yourself.

Other childhood roots, such as abuse or abandonment, can also leave you feeling insecure, lonely, and worthless. If you didn't receive the security, value, and love you needed as a child, you can become vulnerable to developing different, often damaging, ways to fill those empty, hurting places. Then one day, you realize you're addicted to something—trapped by the very substances or behaviors that you thought or hoped would bring you love, value, and happiness.

Unravel the Root: Rebecca's Truth Story

> *If you met me back then, you might've thought I was fine—maybe even strong. But the truth is, I was lost—and doing everything I could to numb the ache inside me. I was deep into drugs and alcohol. Slept around. Took risks I shouldn't have. Struggled with anxiety and depression. I always felt like I wasn't enough. Basically, I was just drifting through life.*
>
> *Eventually, the pain got too big to manage on my own and I finally reached out for help. I started counseling and got connected with a local church. I wasn't sure what I believed, but I knew I couldn't keep living the way I was.*

In therapy, I started digging into my past—and seeing more clearly what was underneath and the patterns I hadn't noticed before.

My parents divorced when I was really young. For a while I lived with my dad and hardly saw my mom. I remember thinking, even my own mom doesn't want me. Later, I lived with her again, but I still felt disconnected from both of them.

For years, I didn't realize my dad had a drinking problem. I just knew he wasn't really there. He didn't show affection, didn't set rules, didn't seem to care what I did. Looking back, I see now that he wasn't just absent—he was afraid. His own dad had been a violent, mean drunk. So my dad drank in secret. And he didn't discipline us because he didn't trust himself. He didn't want to turn into his father.

My mom had her own baggage. Her dad was an alcoholic too. And she married the same kind of man. Twice. After she left my dad, she married another guy addicted to alcohol. I think she was trying to fix in them what she couldn't fix in her dad. Or maybe she didn't even see the pattern—and just kept choosing what felt familiar. I know she couldn't stand being alone. So she poured everything into the men in her life—and ignored or didn't see what it was doing to us.

That meant I was the one taking care of my siblings. They needed me, so I had to grow up fast. But I was still a kid, and no one was looking out for me.

Even though I saw how destructive alcohol was in my family, I ended up following the same path. I guess it was the only way I knew to cope. I drank and did drugs. I chased attention from guys. In the moment, it felt good, but it never lasted.

I realize now I wasn't really looking for love so much as proof that I mattered. That someone saw me. Someone wanted me. But the

relationships were always shallow and short-lived. I didn't know how to connect in a healthy way. And the guys I picked sure didn't either.

I didn't trust anyone. I didn't believe anyone would really show up for me. Because that's not something I ever experienced.

IN HER WORDS

"I really wasn't looking for love so much as proof that I mattered. That someone saw me. Someone wanted me."
- Rebecca

Things are different now. After a lot of time and distance, my mom and I are finally starting to talk about our past. We're both in counseling. And slowly—very slowly—we're rebuilding. Acknowledging what happened. Naming the lies we believed. Offering each other forgiveness. Finding some closeness we never had before.

And my dad? Well, we're working on it. There's still a long way to go. But at least we're having some honest conversations now. That's something I never thought would happen.

It's not quick. It's not easy. But I am healing—one step at a time.

Digging Deeper

We've talked about how addiction roots can develop and lead to damaging behaviors. Rebecca's story showed what that can look like in real life. Now let's reflect and connect the dots to your own story, one step at a time.

Here's the process we'll follow:

- State the **Facts**.
- Expose the **Lies**.
- Acknowledge the **Behaviors**.
- Embrace the **Truths**.
- **Change** the behaviors.

State the Facts

Rebecca's parents divorced when she was young, leaving her caught between a dad who was physically there but emotionally gone and a mom who felt out of reach. Her dad was secretly addicted to alcohol and didn't set any rules because he was afraid of becoming violent like his father. Her mom also grew up with a parent who was addicted and married men like him. She focused on trying to fix them instead of parenting. This left Rebecca to basically raise her siblings, with nobody actually caring for her.

1. What, if any, similarities do you see between Rebecca's upbringing and the **facts** of your own childhood? Differences?

2. How can you relate to Rebecca's feelings even if your **facts** are different?

3. Were you exposed to any type of addiction—substance or behavioral—growing up? If you were, name the **facts** of your root of addiction story.

Expose the Lies

Rebecca believed that her parents didn't care about her or what she was doing. She believed a lie that she was unlovable, unworthy of love, and that she couldn't trust others

4. If addiction was part of your childhood, what **lies** did you believe about yourself based on the behaviors you witnessed in the people around you who had addictions?

Acknowledge the Behaviors

Rebecca started using drugs and alcohol to numb the pain. She turned to men, sex, and risky behaviors hoping to find the attention, love, and connection she was missing.

5. Considering Rebecca's story and how she coped with her roots of addiction, what **behaviors** in your life are similar? Different?

Embrace the Truths

Rebecca eventually realized that her parents' behaviors, addictions, and poor parenting weren't about her—they were about their own unhealed baggage and family patterns. She started to accept that she was a child who deserved to be cared for. She now knows that she has value and worth—no matter how others may treat her.

6. Like Rebecca, you may have lived under the weight of lies you believed about yourself based on the facts of your story. What **truths** are you choosing to believe about yourself today to replace the lies that grew from the root of addiction in your life?

Change the Behaviors

Through counseling, her church, and ongoing support, Recebba was able to make changes. She stopped using substances to numb the pain and left the toxic relationships she leaned on before. Now, she's doing the hard work of having honest conversations with her parents instead of just staying silent. She's building a healthy life based on her true worth.

7. What unhealthy behaviors rooted in addiction have you identified and want to **change**?

8. How are you going to respond differently when you are triggered to believe those lies about yourself that lead you to turn to addictive or other unhealthy behaviors?

Coming Out of the Woods

Home is supposed to be our safe haven from the chaos—the place we can go to find respite from the storms of life. But when you live with someone in addiction, home becomes the chaos. Instead of being

protected, you were left exposed by the very people who were supposed to be your protector.

Growing up in that environment can be like being lost in a dense forest. It's dark, it's unpredictable, and you feel completely alone. If you were a child then, you were powerless. But if you are an adult now, you have a choice. You don't have to live among the trees anymore. And if you're a teen, your power starts with your voice— tell a trusted adult, perhaps a friend's parent, a teacher, or counselor at school, about what you are experiencing and ask for their help.

So, how do you actually leave the woods? You do exactly what you're doing in this book. You stop pretending the forest isn't there. By naming the facts, exposing the lies, and embracing what is actually true, you've started to clear a path. Every time you choose the truth over an old survival behavior, you are taking a step toward the sunlight.

You don't have to find the way out by yourself. If you'd like more support specifically for addiction, consider reaching out to one of the organizations in the Resources section at the back of the book.

Change and healing won't happen all at once. It's a journey. But as you go, remember what Christopher Robin once told Winnie the Pooh: "*You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.*"[25] You survived the woods. Now, it's time to walk out. One step at a time.

Keep Growing! A Seed of Encouragement

— from Karin

> *Growing up, food was complicated in my house. I was constantly criticized for my weight and appearance—belittled and compared to my siblings. My family made me feel like my body was a problem to*

be managed. My parents limited my food while letting my siblings eat whatever and as much as they wanted.

I believed from early on that I wasn't loved or valued and that my body was something to be ashamed of. So I learned to use food the way I would later use other things—to cope, to comfort, to numb.

By the time I was older, I dealt with the pain of my past by numbing it with drugs and alcohol. I tried to satisfy my deep need to be loved through sex with men who didn't truly care about me.

Eventually, I decided getting married was the answer. But a marriage based on all the wrong things—and for all the wrong reasons—is never a good idea. As our relationship simultaneously exploded and imploded—and my addictions were out of control—I realized I really couldn't live like that anymore. I wanted a different life, but I didn't know how.

Still, I knew I was facing either prison or death if I continued on the same path with doing and dealing drugs. So I made the choice to get clean.

Recovering from drugs and alcohol was really hard. I just had to white-knuckle it through one emotional episode at a time. I remember the first really tough time with it. I was in an inpatient recovery center, and everything in me wanted to leave. I was like a caged animal, pacing back and forth. A war was raging inside me. I knew if I left, I would use again. Part of me wanted that. A bigger part of me did not. I stayed. That was my first victory.

I remember another time that was incredibly hard. Someone suggested I look into codependency to see if it might be contributing to my struggles. When I opened the book, just reading the definition of "codependency" was so confronting—it was so me. I cried for days. I

thought I might be the first person to ever die from crying too much. Working through my codependency was one of the best things I've ever done. It was grueling, but worth every tear.

Here's what was true for me: each part of the recovery process got a little easier. All the memories and emotions that came up were hard—but it was worth fighting the urge to push them back down. And each time I stuck with it instead of running or numbing, something shifted. The hard, painful stretches got shorter and further apart.

I'm not the person I was before. I'm not ashamed of what was. I'm very proud of where I am now and who I am becoming. My life is different. I'm living proof that change and healing are possible.

Seeds to Carry Forward

One line that stood out to me…

One hopeful truth I want to remember…

One small step I can take this week…

Prayer

Lord, You know the pain I've tried so hard to numb. You see the cycles of addiction that have been tangled in my family tree since long before I was born. Thank You for the courage to finally stop pretending the forest isn't there and for helping me see that my behaviors are symptoms of deeper wounds.

I bring You the lies I've lived by—the ones that told me I wasn't enough and that I had to chase attention or substances just to feel wanted, needed, or valued as a person. Please replace those lies with Your truth: that I am lovable, that my life has a purpose, and that You are always with me.

Give me the strength to walk a different path today. When I feel the urge to run or hide, help me to pause, to breathe, and to reach out for support. Jesus, thank You for being with me—for taking my hand and reminding me I don't have to be afraid. I am trusting You to help me grow new, healthy fruit, one choice at a time. Amen.

For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

Isaiah 41:13 (NIV)

CHAPTER FOUR

the root of abuse

One day, a gardener plants a young fruit tree. Although tiny, it shows great promise to produce good fruit. But then a violent storm comes up. The raging wind and rain savagely bends the vulnerable little tree and snaps some of its branches. The gardener doesn't blame the *tree* for its injured condition. He recognizes that it was the *storm* that caused the damage.

For many of us, the storm of abuse swept into our lives and left wounds and scars that aren't always easy to see. Sadly, we may have blamed ourselves:

> *I felt I was worth nothing so I let people treat me like nothing.*
>
> *I didn't feel like I could tell anyone. I was so ashamed. I had so much fear.*
>
> *For most of my life, I felt crazy and disconnected. I craved connection, but I was afraid to get close to people.*
>
> *I still become panicked and feel trapped when someone asks me to do something I can't do. For years, I didn't know why.*

Those are actual quotes from women who experienced some form of childhood abuse—physical, emotional, sexual, and/or religious.

Sound Familiar?

Do any of these statements sound like something you have said or thought? Have you wondered—like these women did—why you've truggled with intense feelings of fear, isolation, and shame?

Like the women who shared these words, you may have wondered why you felt so different and isolated from those around you. You may not have connected your feelings—and the behaviors that stemmed from them—to early episodes of abuse.

Understanding where our pain comes from is one of the most important steps toward healing. This may be a difficult chapter to read. It may bring up memories or feelings you haven't sat with in a long time—yet it may also bring long-awaited clarity—and hope. Give yourself permission to go at the pace that feels right for you.

If abuse wasn't a part of your story, this chapter may still have something for you. You may have someone in your life whose experience you're trying to understand. Or you may find that something described here resonates in ways you didn't expect — emotional abuse in particular can be easy to minimize or miss, especially when it was common in your home growing up. Read with an open mind and see what surfaces.

The Pain of Abuse

Abuse is often about power—one person trying to control another.[1] Abuse rarely comes alone, and roots almost always intertwine.

Abuse often happens alongside other problems in the family. If we grew up with abuse, we may have also been affected by conflict, addiction, or other harmful experiences. Each can add to the impact. [2]

Even if you weren't the person being abused, growing up around

abuse has its own profound impact. It can even increase your risk for long-term physical and mental health conditions.[3]

Where Abuse Comes From

Abuse can come from many directions. For some women, the harm came from a parent or caregiver. For others it was a sibling, relative, neighbor, babysitter, coach, teacher, dating partner, classmate, or someone else. Sometimes it was one person; sometimes it was more than one. But the truth is: abuse—no matter who it came from—can leave similar and long-lasting wounds.

Parent-Child Abuse

In our families, abuse often comes out of a parent having been abused as a child—and repeating those patterns with their own children.[4] For example, let's say your grandma used to grab your mom when she was little and scream at her—and your mom did the same to you. Or your parent may have suffered one type of abuse and inflicted a different type on you.

In some cases—through no fault of your own—you may have become your parent's outlet to vent their pent-up rage from the abuse and lack of control they experienced as a child.

Or, as we saw in Rebecca's story in the last chapter, abuse as a child can cause a parent to go to the other extreme. Her father disconnected emotionally and didn't correct or guide her and her siblings at all because he feared he would repeat his own father's abusive patterns.

Sometimes our parents may have been so conditioned by their upbringing that they didn't recognize their behavior as abusive.

Not every parent who abuses their children was abused themselves. What drives a parent to abuse can go beyond the generational cycle. Mental health struggles, overwhelming stress, financial hardship, domestic violence in the home, or having no support system—have all been linked to an increased risk of a parent hurting their children.[5]

Knowing where your parents' harmful behaviors may have come from doesn't make it okay. What happened to you was not acceptable — regardless of what happened to them.

Yet cycles can be broken. The fact that you are here—doing this work —means you are already choosing something different for yourself and for those you love.

Responding to Abuse

We don't all respond to abuse the same way. A lot can shape how it affects us, including our personality and the ways we learned to cope. How severe or long-lasting the abuse was, how often it happened, and whether we had supportive people around us can also influence how it impacts us.[6]

In some cases, we may blame ourselves for the abuse. We might have believed that if we just behaved better or tried harder, the violence or emotional abuse wouldn't have occurred, like *"If I didn't fail that test, my dad wouldn't have hit me."*

Some of us may have become incredibly withdrawn and passive. Or maybe we grew extremely angry and rebelled against those who abused us. We may have wanted to hurt them or others, so they would feel the same kind of pain we did.

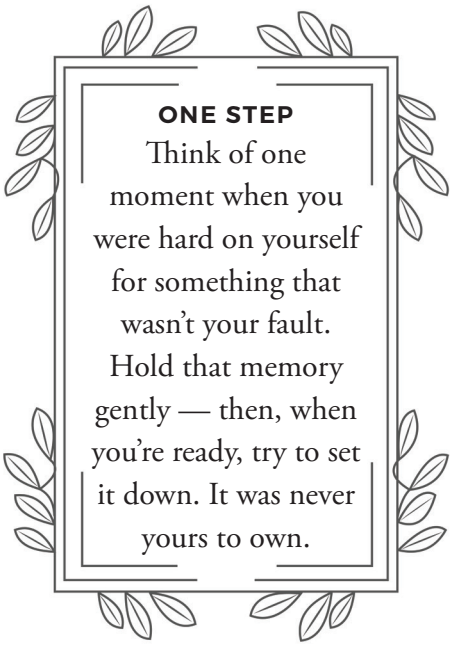
Sometimes our mind finds ways to distance us from painful experiences. One way that can happen is through mentally checking

out during something frightening, feeling disconnected from what's happening, or having gaps in our memory around certain events. And for some of us, patterns and behaviors in our adult lives may trace back to what happened in childhood—even when we haven't recognized or understood that connection.[7]

Abuse, especially in childhood, can damage how we see ourselves. We may have believed that something was wrong with us. One woman explained it this way: *"I believed I was a mistake. I believed everything about me was a mistake."*

When Trust is Broken

Our ability to trust begins to form in childhood. We enter the world completely vulnerable. Trustworthy parents and caregivers are our first source of security and stability—proof that the world is safe and we matter. When some of our earliest experiences were a betrayal of trust by the very people who were supposed to protect us, we can struggle with our own sense of value—and knowing who and how to trust.



This is hard work. Naming abuse, betrayal, and the ways they shaped you is not easy. But every honest step you take matters. As you begin to untangle what happened, you are moving toward truth, safety, and the healing you deserve.

Types of Abuse

While there are many types of abuse, we're going to look at four that often show up in the stories women share: emotional, physical, sexual, and religious. Some are more obvious. Others can go unrecognized for years—minimized, explained away, or dismissed altogether.

It can help to put language to what you experienced. Naming the type of abuse can bring clarity to patterns that may have felt confusing for a long time.

Emotional Abuse

Language and emotions are powerful. When used as weapons, they can critically damage how we think and feel about ourselves and others. Demeaning and insulting words have a way of embedding themselves in our hearts and minds. We absorb them and identify ourselves by the labels we hear, such as ugly, fat, stupid, lazy, or worthless.

Emotional abuse can take many forms— some loud and obvious, others quieter and harder to recognize. It can look like withholding affection, ignoring or neglecting us, or making us feel unloved or unwanted. Sometimes it's name calling, bullying, constant criticism, or belittling. Other times it's regularly dismissing our feelings as unimportant or telling us we're unlovable. It can include comparing us unfavorably to siblings or others, or cutting us off from friends or family. It can also involve threats—of abandonment, harm, or punishment designed to create fear.[8]

Emotional abuse can be deeply damaging. Growing up in this kind of environment can leave lasting marks—like depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and low self-esteem—effects that can follow us into adulthood.[9] Emotional abuse can also lead to learning and educational difficulties and can make relationships and connection genuinely hard, affecting friendships, intimate relationships, parenting, and how we handle conflict.[10]

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the intentional use of force that causes—or could cause—harm to the other person's health, survival, development, or dignity. It can include hitting, beating, kicking, shaking, biting, strangling, scalding, burning, poisoning, and suffocating. Whatever form it takes—even when it was framed as punishment—it was abuse.[11]

Physical abuse can cause immediate physical harm—sometimes even death. Even after physical wounds may heal, depression, anxiety, anger, and PTSD can follow us for decades. So can eating disorders, substance misuse, and suicidal thoughts. Even our bodies can carry the weight—in chronic pain, headaches, stomach problems, and other physical conditions we may never think to connect back to what happened to us as children.[12]

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is unwanted sexual activity involving force, threats, manipulation, or coercion.[13] Often, we can feel shame after experiencing it. We may feel we invited or encouraged it in some way.

Sometimes our bodies respond involuntarily and in ways that our minds and hearts didn't want or choose. That can be deeply confusing—even shameful—when everything inside us was repulsed, terrified, or traumatized. That response was not consent. It was not invitation. It was just our bodies doing what bodies do, completely outside of our control.[14] Sometimes the person who harmed us used that response to make us feel responsible—turning something our body did naturally into a reason for shame and silence.

For children especially, this complexity runs deep. When our bodies respond naturally with arousal sensations, it can create profound confusion—and vulnerability. It may make it harder to recognize

what's happening as harmful, harder to tell someone, and harder to make sense of our own feelings afterward.

> *"As a child, I was verbally abused by my dad. My mom didn't protect me. Then, my older brother began to show me inappropriate affection—fondling and other inappropriate touching. Even though I knew it was wrong, I was so damaged and hungry for love and acceptance that a part of me enjoyed it. I finally felt loved. It filled a void and a deep need in me."*
>
> *—Rhonda, sexual abuse survivor*

Sexual abuse can affect nearly every part of how we live and love. It can shape how we feel about our bodies, how safe we feel in relationships, and whether intimacy feels possible. For some of us, it can lead to struggles with depression, panic attacks, PTSD, eating disorders, substance misuse, suicidal thoughts—and to difficulty trusting others.[15]

Religious Abuse

Religious abuse, although less often discussed, can also be devastating. We were designed to have a healthy, loving relationship with God. Yet sometimes parents and others can manipulate, shame, control, and intimidate us by using a false or distorted view of God and religion. They may have used faith as a justification for abusive behaviors.

In homes where religion is misused, we may not have been allowed to question the family's beliefs and behaviors. Maybe we were isolated from people who didn't share our parent's beliefs. That "us against the world" mentality may have felt like we were cut off from outside perspectives or help. Our parents or someone else may have forced, manipulated, or subjected us to abusive behaviors in the name of God or religion—often through fear, guilt, and shame.

Being taught religious values that are very different from how your

parents or caregivers behave can be deeply confusing. It can cause you to feel distant, resentful, or angry toward God or your faith.

One woman describes what this looked like in her home:

> *For a long time, I thought my parents were just strict and really serious about faith. My mom obsessed over how we looked at church. She'd whisper at me to "fix my face" or sit up straight because I was "hurting the family's witness." My dad used the Bible to control everything. If I disagreed or questioned him, I wasn't just "disrespectful"—I was "rebellious against God."*
>
> *At church, our pastor said parents were "God's voice" in a child's life. That terrified me, because my dad's voice was usually yelling. I figured God must be like him: angry, impossible to please, always ready to punish.*
>
> *The strangest part was the double life. At home we walked on eggshells. At church we smiled. At home, my dad belittled my mom and kept us on edge. But at church, everyone loved him—the friendly leader quoting verses about love. And my mom talked with the other ladies about the "blessings of marriage and children," even though in private their relationship was miserable and she treated us like burdens.*
>
> *I didn't realize how distorted it was until I spent a weekend with my college roommate's family. They were Christians too, but their home felt different. They laughed. They disagreed without anyone exploding. When something broke or went wrong, no one used God to shame someone into line. Their faith made them kinder, not harsher. They weren't hurt, afraid, or silenced.*
>
> *That weekend cracked something open for me. I began to see the difference between faith and control. And slowly, I'm learning that*

> *God isn't like my parents. He isn't threatened by my questions. He doesn't need me to shrink for the sake of appearances. For the first time, faith feels like relief—not a burden.*
>
> *—Sarah, religious and emotional abuse survivor*

Religious abuse can leave a particular kind of wound—one that touches not only how we feel about ourselves, but how we relate to God and to faith itself. We may find ourselves unable to trust religious leaders or communities. We may carry anger toward God for what was done in his name. For some of us, faith becomes something to avoid rather than a source of comfort. Untangling what was truly of God from what was used to control us can be one of the most tender and complex parts of healing.

Abuse, regardless of its form, can damage our identity and security—the very building blocks we need to develop healthy behaviors and relationships.

Sound Familiar?

Did any of these descriptions of emotional, physical, sexual, or religious abuse help you put words to something you experienced or witnessed growing up? What stood out to you?

Unravel the Root: Lily's Truth Story

> *I thought about ending my life when I was a teenager. I had these confusing sexual feelings and urges I didn't understand. I felt so much shame, like there was something deeply wrong with me. That shame was in everything—how I thought about myself, how I acted, even how I looked at other people. It got so dark that I thought suicide might be the only way out of the pain. But I didn't tell anyone. It didn't feel safe.*

Around that time, my best friend and her mom started going to church, and I went with them. That's where I first heard about God. For the first time, I felt a kind of hope, acceptance, and value I had never known before. It gave me a reason to believe life was worth living.

Things went fairly well for a while, but during my senior year of college I read an article about sexual abuse. Something in it hit me hard — I felt upset, disgusted, even angry, and I didn't know why. I prayed and asked God to show me what was going on. After that, memories began surfacing in pieces—more like flashes and feelings at first. Bit by bit, more came back, and I realized the abuse began when I was really little, around three years old—and continued for years. The memories made me sick to my stomach. I cried for days.

When I told my best friend, she was so compassionate. She listened as I poured out memories I had buried for so long. Things started making sense — why I had always struggled so much with shame and worthlessness. That was the beginning of my healing, although there was still a lot of pain underneath the surface.

Eventually, I got into a relationship with a kind man I thought I would marry. When he suddenly broke it off, all my hidden insecurities came roaring back. My struggle with self-worth spiraled, and I developed an eating disorder. I wasted away to just 78 pounds.

I knew I couldn't keep living like that. I spent a year rebuilding—emotionally, physically, spiritually. I leaned on supportive friends and a great counselor who walked with me through the pain.

I still don't understand why the abuse happened, but I came to realize it wasn't my fault. It was never about me—it was his terrible choice.

Instead of growing bitter, I chose to let safe people and God into my pain. That choice brought healing and, over time, gave me the

strength to forgive my abuser—for my own peace. Not to excuse what he did or act like it wasn't horrible. But because I didn't want him still taking up space in my mind or emotions. Forgiveness gave me a kind of freedom and control I never had as a child.

Today, I'm no longer tied to my abuser. I've learned to trust again, I married a good man, and together we raised two children. The memories of the abuse are still there, but they no longer control my life or my decisions.

Digging Deeper

We've talked about how abuse roots can develop and lead to damaging behaviors. Lily's story showed what that can look like in real life. Now let's reflect and connect the dots to your own story, one step at a time.

Here's the process we'll follow:

- State the **Facts**.
- Expose the **Lies**.
- Acknowledge the **Behaviors**.
- Embrace the **Truths**.
- **Change** the behaviors.

State the Facts

Lily was sexually abused starting when she was very young. She didn't tell anyone and carried confusing feelings and deep shame for years. As a college senior, something she read triggered memories that came back in pieces.

1. What similarities do you see between Lily's upbringing and the **facts** of your own childhood? Differences?

2. How can you relate to Lily's feelings even if your **facts** are different?

3. Have you experienced any type of abuse—emotional, physical, sexual, religious, or something else—growing up? If you did, name the **facts** of your root of abuse story.

Expose the Lies

Because of what happened, Lily started believing there was something deeply wrong with her. She carried the lie that she was shameful, damaged, and not truly worth loving or protecting. When things got dark, she also believed suicide might be the only way out. Even as an adult, the old message she internalized was: It's my fault… and I'm stuck this way.

4. If abuse was part of your childhood, what **lies** did you believe about yourself based on those facts of your childhood?

Acknowledge the Behaviors

Lily's pain didn't just stay in her thoughts—it showed up in how she coped. She kept the abuse hidden and tried to carry it alone. When her self-worth crashed, she turned that pain inward and developed an eating disorder, trying to regain control and quiet the chaos inside. She stayed stuck in fear and shame for years before she finally reached out for help.

5. Considering Lily's story, what **behaviors** in your life are similar? Different?

6. What **behaviors** have you developed or relied on to cope with abuse roots in your life?

Embrace the Truths

Through counseling, supportive people, and faith, Lily began to see the truth: the abuse was not her fault. What happened was about her abuser's terrible choice—not Lily's value or worth. She began to believe she deserved to be protected and cared for. And she learned that while abuse is part of her story, it does not define who she is.

7. Like Lily, you may have lived under the weight of lies you believed about yourself based on the facts of your story. What **truths** are you choosing to believe about yourself today to replace the lies that grew from the root of abuse?

Change the Behaviors

Lily stopped keeping everything locked inside and began opening up to safe people. She got counseling and committed time to healing emotionally, physically, and spiritually. She moved away from self-harming patterns and toward support, honesty, and healthier care for her body. She chose to forgive—for her own peace—not as an excuse, and not as access. Over time, she learned to trust again and build safe, steady relationships.

8. What unhealthy behaviors rooted in abuse have you identified and want to **change**?

9. How are you going to respond differently when you are triggered to believe those lies about yourself that lead you to engage in unhealthy behaviors because of your roots of abuse?

Bent, But Not Broken

During an intense storm, a tree can be badly bent, especially when it's young and its root system isn't firmly established. That doesn't mean something was wrong with the tree when it was planted. It was the storm that damaged the tree. With some careful attention and nurturing, that tree can in time stand tall, grow, and produce healthy fruit.

CLOSE TO THE ROOT

You were never the cause of the storm, and you weren't responsible for the damage it did. You were a child who deserved to be safe.

God created you with great value and purpose. The abuse you endured may have left you feeling bent or broken, but your worth still stands, and healing and growth are possible.

Keep Growing! A Seed of Encouragement

— From a survivor of abuse

> *I grew up in a house where you never knew which version of my dad was going to walk through the front door. Some nights he was fine, but other nights… The sound of his steps, the silence when we said hello, the way he threw his keys down—we'd all quietly scurry to find someplace where he wouldn't see us. By the time I was in my twenties, I walked right into a marriage that felt exactly like home.*
>
> *For years, I told myself that because he didn't hit me every day, it*

wasn't really abuse. I focused on the good days to get through the scary ones. I thought if I could just be a better wife or keep the kids quieter, he wouldn't lose his temper. It's a hard, lonely way to live. I felt like I was disappearing more and more until I didn't even recognize myself.

I finally got out. I had my own place and the kids and I were safe. I thought I could just close that chapter of my life. But his voice was still in my head. The fear was still underneath. I was still jumping at noises, still tip-toeing around. I realized that getting safe wasn't the same thing as being healed. I had to stop looking at what they did and start looking at what it did to me.

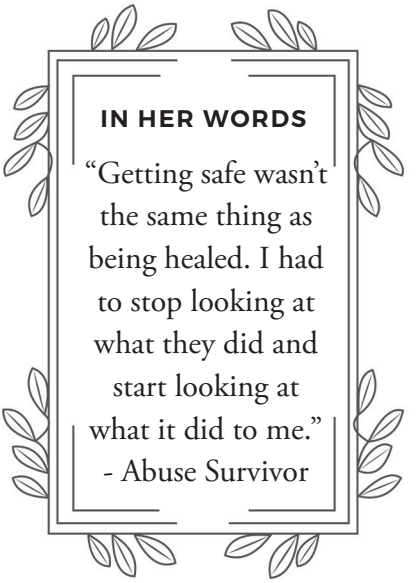
Going through healing wasn't easy. I felt like I was betraying my family by talking about the things that happened behind closed doors. There were days when the memories of my childhood and the reality of my marriage all got tangled together, and I just felt overwhelmed. I wanted to quit. I thought maybe it'd be easier to just stay numb than to feel how much it hurt.

But I kept going for me—and for my kids. I remembered being their age and holding my breath in the hallway, and I promised myself they would never have to live that way again. The other day, my son accidentally knocked over a lamp. My heart started racing—that old instinct to brace for an explosion. But I took a breath and we just cleaned it up. No one screamed. No one was shaking. Seeing him go right back to playing like nothing happened was such a win.

I know now that the horrible things my father and husband said and did to me weren't my fault—it was their choice. It was a lie that I was responsible for their behavior or that I should be ashamed of having been abused. I had spent so many years trying to figure out the "right" way to talk, act, or handle them so they wouldn't be angry or hurt me. But I didn't cause their cruelty, and no matter how perfect I

tried to be, I was never going to be able to stop it.

Now, I have this quiet sense of peace. I can sit in a room and not be scanning for an exit or watching someone's hands or facial expressions. I'm still learning what it means to be safe and healthy. Some days are still heavy, but I don't feel like I'm drowning anymore. I'm finally standing on my own two feet, and for the first time, the ground feels solid. And I have hope for myself and for my kids.



Seeds to Carry Forward

One line that stood out to me…

One hopeful truth I want to remember…

One small step I can take this week…

Prayer

God, You see me—all of me, including the parts of my story I've never said out loud. If I carry shame, confusion, or guilt that isn't mine, help me lay it down.

Remind me that being hurt was not my fault. Heal the parts of me that still feel small, afraid, or unheard. When memories surface, surround me with safety and truth.

Heal the places in me that are afraid to trust again. Lead me to people who are safe. Restore what was wounded. Help me believe my story is not defined by what was done to me. Amen.

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 36:7 (NIV)

CHAPTER FIVE

the root of codependency

In a healthy forest, trees at various stages support one another. A tall tree offers shade from the midday sun while saplings take root. Leaves fall and enrich the soil, helping the next generation grow stronger. Over time, the younger tree gets what it needs—light, water, nutrients, space—and it flourishes…becoming all it was meant to be.

Now contrast that with trees that are clumped together. Their roots become intertwined, and they compete for water, nutrients, and light. Without enough room or resources, their growth is hindered. They may produce fewer leaves and less fruit and become a shadow of what they could have been. And so it is with us.

When we become too closely intertwined with others, depending on them for our sense of value and purpose, we can experience similar damaging effects to our personal growth and development. This is often called codependency.

We are all born with healthy dependency needs—that change as we grow.[1] In Chapter Two we talked about the fact that we need our parents or caregivers to provide love, support, acceptance, and examples of strong relationships and appropriate boundaries. This kind of foundation lets us develop a sense of identity and value as children that

can carry into adulthood as a solid sense of independence.

These vital anchors help us feel secure enough to take risks, make mistakes, and explore and discover our own unique desires, skills, qualities, and talents. That security also helps us to bounce back from failures and learn more about ourselves in the process.

CLOSE TO THE ROOT

There's a difference between *carrying* someone and *caring* for someone. Carrying erases you. Caring connects you and lets you stay yourself.

A healthy parent or caregiver encourages age-appropriate independence, which helps us gradually learn to trust ourselves and gain confidence in who we are and what we're capable of. And this provides a framework for developing healthy interdependent relationships—where you can rely on each other and still stay yourself. You're able to communicate your needs and provide mutual support, while maintaining your own identity and autonomy.

But if you had a parent who struggled with addiction, mental or physical illness, or was consistently self-centered, then you likely didn't receive a solid foundation for healthy self-discovery. You may have been given the message early on that your feelings, needs, and desires were unimportant or secondary to your parent's. When you expressed your wants and needs, you may have even been made to feel dismissed, selfish, or guilty.[2]

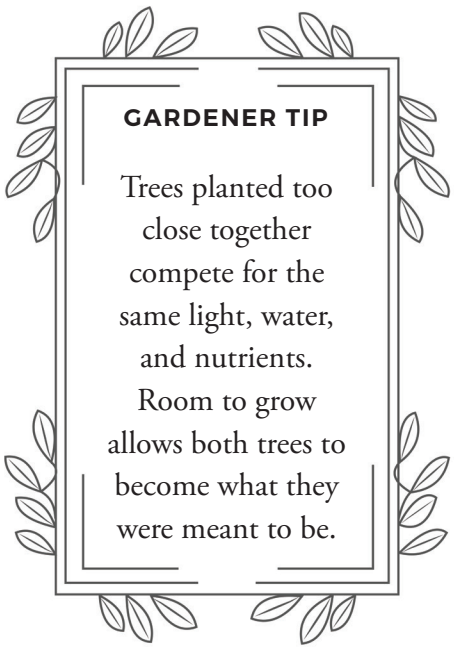
In some cases, the parent-child roles may have been reversed. You may have carried a weight of responsibilities you weren't equipped to handle as a child. For example, if you had a parent with alcohol

addiction, you may have had to make meals or take care of siblings from a very young age. Maybe your parent was in an abusive or unhealthy relationship and heavily depended on you for support or comfort. You may have developed patterns of consistently rescuing or caring for your parent, which isn't how the parent-child relationship is supposed to work.

While it's natural to want your parents' acceptance and approval, sometimes their expectations and demands are unhealthy. Your parent(s) may have made you feel that the only way you could be accepted, loved, or "good enough" was to suppress your own thoughts, needs, opinions, and desires—and adapt to theirs.

How Codependency Can Take Hold

These childhood messages and experiences can cause us to link our acceptance, purpose, and value to our ability to care for others physically and/or emotionally, to make others happy, or to gain their approval. These patterns can follow us into adulthood, leading us to sacrifice ourselves and accommodate others in ways that are draining and destructive—to us and to them as well. Yet the driving need to feel self-worth, purpose, and value runs so deep that we are often willing to sacrifice our physical, mental, and emotional health.



Here's the tricky part: what looks like "helping" can sometimes

keep both people stuck. It often protects others from experiencing the consequences of their choices, further enabling and encouraging them to continue in those damaging patterns. And we become so enmeshed with someone else that we mold our behavior and opinions to fit what they seem to want or need, preventing us from discovering who we truly are and what we have to offer—independent of our performance or success at "fixing" or pleasing others.

With codependency, we often end up in relationships with people who are similar to our parent(s). Sometimes without even realizing it, we gravitate toward people we can help, rescue, and "fix" in order to continue to fill our ongoing need to feel valuable and important.[3] Being drawn to "needy" people means that we often find ourselves in draining or abusive one-sided relationships. We typically think of people with codependency as relationships with someone with substance use or other addictions. While that is one way codependency happens, unhealthy self-sacrifice can be found in all types of relationships, such as romantic, friend, parental, and work relationships.

What Codependent Relationships Can Look Like

In healthy relationships, there is a natural give-and-take. Over time, both people in the relationship provide and receive a relatively balanced degree of love, support, and understanding. This beneficial bond promotes individual growth, strength, and a sense of resilience. At the same time, each person has a very clear sense of their own identity, value, and purpose separate from the other person.

In a codependent relationship, that balance is missing, with each person having a dysfunctional role. One person is the giver, carrying too much—overfunctioning, rescuing, keeping the peace, and sacrificing their own well-being. The other person is the taker, relying on

and benefiting from that dynamic and avoiding responsibility.[4] The relationship can start to feel like one person creates the chaos and the other person manages or cleans it up.

We may think it's because we love or care about the other person, but in codependent patterns, our understanding of love can get distorted. Sometimes we end up loving the sense of worth and identity we get from caring for the person more than we love the person. It's like we need to be needed—to be the fixer, the steady one. We twist ourselves into a pretzel—changing our behavior and our personalities—in order to try to make the other person happy. While maintaining the relationship may damage, exhaust, and frustrate us, we are hesitant to do anything to risk losing it. Our value and purpose are far too tangled up and invested in its survival.

Barking up the Wrong Tree

Helping is a good thing. But there's a fine line between wanting to help and *needing* to help—or fix—someone. Think about *why* you want to help others. In a given situation, you can ask yourself, *"Am I trying to support or fix this person?"* Then, *"If I am trying to help, is it for me or them? Am I helping in order to feel needed, wanted, important, or valued?"*

If your answer is more about filling a need in *you*—for recognition, value, control, or security—than in helping the other person, you may be codependent.

Codependency can show up in other ways, too. See if any of these feel familiar:[5]

Low self-worth is often at the core. When your sense of value depends on how others see you, feel about you, or need you, it creates a shaky foundation. People's feelings and opinions of us are notoriously

unreliable, often misguided, and based on incomplete information or their own wounds or self-serving motives. Yet we hand them the power to define us.

From there, **chameleon-like behavior** can take hold. You suppress your own thoughts, opinions, and feelings—adapting and reshaping yourself to be accepted or loved by the other person. Over time, you may not know what you truly enjoy, think, or feel. If someone asked *"who are you when no one is watching?"*—you might not have an answer.

That shapeshifting often goes hand in hand with **assuming the role of rescuer or problem solver.** When taking care of or "fixing" someone else is the source of your value, you may find yourself making excuses for or covering their inappropriate or irresponsible behaviors that aren't yours to own. That enabling keeps both people stuck.

Codependency also makes it **difficult to set boundaries or say "no"**—even when saying "yes" is negatively affecting your physical, mental, or emotional health. Maybe it feels like saying no would risk the relationship, approval, or the self-worth you've built around being needed. The desire to please others runs deeper than just being nice, and you may not even realize how much you're giving away until there's almost nothing left.

Underneath all of it is often **fear** — fear of losing the relationship, fear of being rejected, fear that if we stop being needed we'll stop having value. That fear often quietly becomes **guilt**. When someone we care for struggles or fails, it can feel like *our* failure—like we didn't give enough, fix enough, love enough. So we keep giving—setting aside our own needs, our own feelings, our own voice. And often without realizing it, resentment and anger grow in the silence of everything we've pushed down.

The reach of codependency goes further than most of us realize. The same patterns that once helped us survive a difficult childhood can

quietly shape how we see ourselves, who we choose to be with, and how we show up in our relationships. The roots may run deep —but they can be untangled.[6]

Sound Familiar?

Did you watch someone in your family rescue, cover for, make excuses for, or clean up after another person? What did that teach you about your role in relationships?

ONE STEP

Before you say yes to something today, pause three seconds and ask: do I want to do this, or do I feel like I have to? You don't have to change your answer. Just notice.

Unravel the Root: Debbie's Truth Story

I hit a breaking point after yet another relationship fell apart. I had bent over backwards—again—to try to make it work. I kept thinking if I just gave more, loved harder, sacrificed more of myself, maybe this time he would stay. But the result was always the same: I ended up hurt, drained, and feeling completely abandoned.

I remember asking myself, "Why does every relationship I have end this way?" It played on a loop in my head. I didn't want to keep repeating the same mistakes. And I couldn't keep hurting the people I loved—especially my daughters. I started to see how my choices were shaping how they viewed love, men, and marriage. That scared me.

So I made a decision to get help—to figure out how to be healthier in relationships. I started seeing a counselor. And I joined a healing group at my church that focused on codependency and dysfunctional relationships. Both were hard. But they changed everything.

As I started looking at my past, I realized I always believed I came

from a near-perfect family. When I was young, everything felt stable and happy. But even then, I struggled to feel like I belonged. I was the middle child in a big family, always wondering where I fit in. The one thing I did know was that I was my dad's favorite. I lived for that. I loved knowing he was proud of me.

Then everything shattered.

I was twelve when my dad told me he was leaving. He told me—before he even told my mom. I felt important for a minute, like I mattered to him more than anyone else. But after he left, that feeling disappeared. I missed him so much, and I kept reaching out, hoping he'd show up for me. But he didn't. He broke promise after promise. He pulled away. The man I had built my identity around was suddenly gone.

My mom had to work constantly to pay the bills. I stepped in to care for my two younger brothers. That became my purpose—taking care of people, keeping things together. And without even realizing it, I can see now that I spent my whole life trying to find the value and approval I lost when my dad left. At first it was by helping at home, and later by choosing relationships with men who needed "fixing."

I kept trying to recreate the "perfect family" I thought I once had. I was drawn to men who were struggling and threw myself into their lives. If I could just help them, support them, love them enough—maybe they'd stay. Maybe I'd finally feel wanted, loved. But it never worked. No matter how much I gave, it was never enough. And each time they left, my sense of worth took another hit. And I would think, I just have to get it right next time.

As an adult now, I know that my dad's leaving wasn't about me… but it sure felt like it at the time. And for years after that, I felt like I had been abandoned by every man in my life. I kept wondering

what was wrong with me. I gave everything I had—tried to be lovable, selfless… whatever each man needed. And still, I got left.

Through healing, I started to see the pattern—how tightly I'd tied my worth to being chosen, and how often I lost myself trying to keep someone. I finally realized they left because of their own pain, their own brokenness—not because I wasn't worthy of love.

And once I began putting distance between myself and those unhealthy relationships, something unexpected happened: I started to come alive. I began to notice the things I liked, the dreams I'd buried, the parts of me I had shoved down to make everyone else happy. I'm still discovering who I am—and honestly, I kind of love being surprised by it.

The more I connected with my faith and surrounded myself with people who saw me for who I am—not for what I could do for them—the more started to feel real acceptance. Real love.

IN HER WORDS

"I'm not just a caregiver. I'm not just a fixer. I'm a whole person — and I matter."
- Debbie

I'm still working on it. I'm still learning to trust myself, especially when it comes to relationships. And while I'm open to a new relationship—a healthy one— I know I don't need one to have worth. And I don't have to lose myself to be loved.

I'm not just a caregiver. I'm not just a fixer. I'm a whole person—and I matter.

—Debbie

Digging Deeper

We've talked about how codependency roots can develop and lead to damaging behaviors. Debbie's story showed what that can look like in real life. Now let's reflect and connect the dots to your own story, one step at a time.

Here's the process we'll follow:

- State the **Facts**.
- Expose the **Lies**.
- Acknowledge the **Behaviors**.
- Embrace the **Truths**.
- **Change** the behaviors.

State the Facts

Debbie's perception of her "perfect" family and her position as "Daddy's favorite" disappeared when her dad left the family when she was twelve. After the divorce, he disconnected, and she rarely saw him. Her mom worked long hours, and Debbie became the one helping with meals and looking after her two younger brothers. She learned from a young age to keep things together and take care of people.

1. What similarities do you see between Debbie's upbringing and the **facts** of your own childhood? Differences?

2. How can you relate to Debbie's feelings even if your **facts** are different?

3. Were you exposed to any form of codependency growing up? Name the **facts** of your codependency story.

Expose the Lies

Debbie's self-value as a child was tied to being "daddy's girl." After her dad left, Debbie started to believe *something was wrong with her*—or that *she wasn't enough for her dad to stay*. She tied her worth to being someone's favorite, someone's priority, someone's "yes." She believed she had to earn love by giving more, sacrificing more, and being what someone else needed or wanted. Deep down, she believed: *If I can just do it right, they won't leave.*

4. If codependency was part of your childhood, what **lies** did you believe about yourself based on the behaviors you witnessed in the people around you who were codependent?

Acknowledge the Behaviors

Those lies didn't stay in Debbie's head—they shaped how she lived. Tying her value to being a caretaker, she overfunctioned: rescuing, fixing, and sacrificing herself to keep relationships from falling apart. She took on too much responsibility, both in her family and with men, trying to keep everyone okay. She kept chasing a "perfect family" through relationships—only to end up drained and hurt when it fell apart again.

5. Considering Debbie's story, what **behaviors** in your life are similar? Different?

6. What **behaviors** have you developed or relied on to cope as a result of codependency roots in your life?

Embrace the Truths

Through counseling and healing, Debbie began to see the truth more clearly: her relationships didn't end because she failed to love the other person well enough or wasn't worthy of love. Debbie realized

she is more than what she can do for other people—and she doesn't have to lose herself to be loved. She is worthy—period. She can choose mutual, healthy relationships—and stay grounded in who she is, even if someone else walks away. She is a whole person, and she matters.

7. Like Debbie, you may have lived under the weight of lies you believed about yourself based on the facts of your story. What **truths** are you choosing to believe about yourself today to replace the lies that grew from the root of codependency?

8. Where have you tied your worth to being needed, approved of, or loved by others? What would it look like to begin discovering who you are—apart from the roles you've played for other people?

Change the Behaviors

Debbie began stepping back from unhealthy relationships and creating space for healthier patterns. She started learning boundaries—what's hers to carry and what isn't. And she began rebuilding her life around truth: caring for others without losing herself, and choosing relationships that are mutual and steady.

9. What unhealthy behaviors rooted in codependency have you identified and want to **change**?

10. What **changes** will you make the next time you feel the urge to help, fix, rescue, or manage the other person?

11. How are you going to respond differently when you are triggered to believe those lies about yourself that lead you to engage in unhealthy codependent behaviors?

Free to Flourish

One of the most painful parts about living with codependency is that because we are so focused on being who others want us to be, we miss out on discovering who we are. The interests we didn't explore. The gifts and qualities we didn't develop. The dreams we set aside. We miss out on the version of ourselves we were created to be. And those around us miss out on that version of us, too.

Finding that version of ourselves—and the path to who we really are—requires facing some hard truths. We may have to admit that all of our "helping" is really more about us than about them. We may have to acknowledge that the people we want so much to love us actually aren't healthy enough to be capable of it. Those realizations aren't easy. But as truth is exposed, light can shine in. When we let go of pursuing relationships, performance, and "rescuing" as our source of value, we begin to discover the real us—the one buried beneath all that caretaking, enabling, and overfunctioning.

Your self-worth was never meant to depend on others like a mirror that only shows you a good reflection when someone else is happy or needs you. Here's what is true: you are of immense value. You are worth discovering.

Discovering Me

You may be so used to focusing on everyone else—paying attention to what they want from you—that it feels unfamiliar to notice yourself. This is a chance to take some time to think about your own wants, limits, and longings.

12. What's one thing you enjoy that has nothing to do with anyone else's needs or opinions?

13. What's one thing you agreed to recently — or found yourself doing for someone — that you really didn't want to do?

14. How did that affect you—emotionally, mentally, physically?

15. The next time you feel that pressure to over-give or say "yes" when you don't want to, what could a healthy "no" or "not now" sound like for you?

16. What's one thing you've set aside — a hobby, an interest, a dream — that you'd like to pick back up?

Keep Growing! A Seed of Encouragement

From the time I was fifteen, I always had a boyfriend. I shifted my choices, my opinions, and my preferences to whatever I thought would make a guy want me, whatever I thought would make him happy. When one relationship ended, I looked for the next one. I needed a man's approval to feel beautiful and worthwhile.

When I read Debbie's story, it reminded me so much of my mother. My mom had a long history of failed relationships that really shaped my life and my view of men. By the time I became an adult, our relationship was strained and rocky. I felt like she was giving me relationship advice that she had never followed herself. And yet—she is also the person who helped lead me into healing, and she's still part of that journey for me.

When I was pregnant with my second child, my marriage—and my self-esteem—crumbled. Normally, I would have jumped into another relationship. But my pregnancy made that impossible. In that forced alone time, I found myself reflecting on why my relationships always ended so badly.

During that same time, I could see my mom starting to make healthier choices. She wasn't suddenly a different person—she was still in an unhealthy relationship. But I could tell that her mindset and choices were changing. So when my marriage was struggling, I reached out to her.

And she was there for me. She didn't lecture me or try to give me advice. She just said, "What do you need from me?" That love and acceptance was a turning point for me—and for our relationship. With her support, plus counseling and a growing faith, I began to

take real steps toward healing.

I grew up with a basic idea about God, but for the first time, I began to truly pour out my issues and problems to Him instead of looking to a man to make me feel valuable. I also went to a counselor who asked some hard questions that really challenged me to think about why I kept missing the "red flags" in so many of the men I dated. At first I was defensive. But gradually, I started to understand how I overlooked even obvious warning signs. The truth is: my identity was so wrapped up in meeting men's wants and needs that I didn't even know who I was or what I needed.

Through that process and finding support in my church, I began to see that I was repeating patterns from my childhood. How I viewed men, myself, and God was rooted in my upbringing. As I began to change and forgive, my relationship with God grew stronger and deeper. My relationship with my mom began to heal too. It was challenging, painful work at times. But it has been worth every step.

As I let go of looking to men for my value, I started to discover who I am. I started noticing what I like, what matters to me, what feels true to me—and what kind of life I actually want.

That old internal battle—between being who I am and who I thought I needed to be for others—has ended. Now I have a peace I didn't have before. I feel like I am living my authentic life.

I still care deeply about people. The difference is now I can be compassionate toward others and their struggles, but I no longer feel responsible for "fixing" them. My identity is no longer tied to others or to being needed. The people in my life now are good for me. They are healthy, honest, and want to grow, too. And they challenge me to continue growing.

> *I used to run to a new man or a new distraction to avoid being alone, to avoid feeling, to avoid facing the truth about my choices and behaviors. But when I finally quit running, I found someone valuable and beautiful, someone I grew to love: Me.*
>
> *—Lisa Rowe, LCSW*

Seeds to Carry Forward

One line that stood out to me…

One hopeful truth I want to remember…

One small step I can take this week…

Prayer

Lord, You know how easy it is for me to lose myself in other people. You see where I've looked for security in people, for approval in relationships, and for worth in being needed. I'm bringing all of that to You.

Teach me to rest in Your love—that doesn't depend on my performance, my usefulness, or my ability to keep everyone happy. When I feel pulled to make others the center of my life, draw my heart back to You and remind me who I am in You.

Help me listen for Your voice above every other voice. Give me wisdom to love others well without losing myself, and courage to take the next right step—even if it feels unfamiliar. Lead me into freedom, and make my life steady and rooted in You.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

You are precious and honored in my sight.

Isaiah 43:4a (NIV)

CHAPTER SIX

where do i grow now?

Finishing *Unraveled Roots* can feel like exhaling after holding your breath for a long time. Maybe you feel clearer than you did when you started. Maybe you feel lighter in a way that surprises you. Or maybe you feel tender—like you've pulled at threads you didn't even realize were wrapped around your heart. A lot of women finish this book with what feels like an odd mix of relief and vulnerability. You've named patterns. You've traced roots. You've started separating facts from lies—and noticing how your past shaped the way you cope.

And now you're standing at the edge of something new: what happens next.

Before you read this chapter, take a minute and look back at the end of Chapter One. Reread your answer to: **"What brought you to this book?"** That question mattered then, and it can matter even more now.

What did you write then?

Sometimes your first answer is about the obvious "fruit"—the behaviors, the relationships, the struggles. By the end of the book, you may see the deeper "roots" that were feeding it. Or you may notice your answer has softened, clarified, or become more honest. That's part of the work too.

Looking back at what you wrote — what may have shifted for you since then?

It's also normal if you expected finishing this book to feel more final than it does. Healing rarely gives us a clean ending. More often it comes in layers. You work through one root, and another shows up.

Or you start making healthier choices in one area, and something else rises to the surface that you weren't aware of or didn't have words for before.

It can help to picture healing like peeling an onion. Each layer you pull back is real—and each layer can make your eyes water. It's a sign you're finally starting to feel and address what you once had to ignore in order to survive.

1. What "layers of your onion" do you feel like you've peeled?

So What Do You Do With Everything You've Learned?

You don't have to do everything. You don't have to fix your whole life in one heroic burst of motivation—in fact even trying that would not be healthy. You simply choose a next step—one that fits your life, your capacity, and what's most "active" inside you right now.

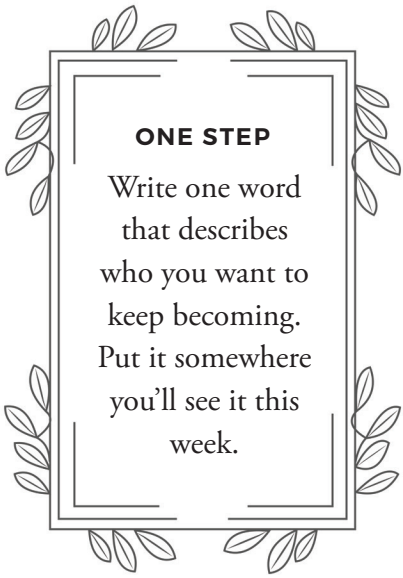
For some women, the next step is **continuing the work in a focused way**: choosing one root that feels most present and asking: *Where am I still getting triggered? What lie gets loud when I feel lonely, rejected, anxious, or unsafe? What truth do I want to practice this week, on purpose?* That kind of steady, intentional practice is how new patterns begin to take root.

For other women, the next step is **support**—because some layers are just too heavy to carry alone. Sometimes one of the four roots you've worked through here—abandonment, addiction, abuse, or codependency—still feels "active," and you want help going deeper.

Other times, this process stirs up things you didn't expect. It might be grief you haven't been able to name or memories you want to process safely. It could be struggles with mental health concerns, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts. Maybe it's eating disorders—or unhealthy eating like ignoring hunger cues, undereating or overeating, especially due to negative body image. It might even be heavy experiences like exploitation or trafficking, or painful parts of your reproductive story—like miscarriage, infertility, family separation, or abortion. Whatever it is for you, if it feels bigger than what a book can hold, there's wisdom in getting help beyond these pages.

Sometimes healing needs a witness—someone safe who can help you sort what's yours to carry, what was done to you, what you never deserved, and what you're ready to release. That support can look different depending on the need: a trusted mentor, a counselor or

therapist, a support group, a local church community, or something else. If you're not sure where to start, the Resources section at the end of this book offers starting points, so you're not left trying to figure it out alone.



There's another part of taking your next steps that matters too: **practicing one new pattern in real life**. This is where the work becomes less about insight and more about living differently. Not in a pressure-filled way—more like choosing a small action that honors what you've learned. For one woman that might be setting and enforcing a boundary she's been avoiding. For another it's a healthier coping skill when she feels triggered. For another it's speaking the truth to one safe person instead of numbing or pretending. Each small step takes you farther along in your healing journey.

2. What surfaced that you weren't expecting—or that you may want to keep exploring?

3. What might be your next step?

4. What kind of support might help you as you take that next step?

Unravel the Next Layer: Tina's Hope Story

> *If you had met me right before I picked up Unraveled Roots, you probably would've thought I was fine. I was getting things done. Achieving. Taking care of my family, my parents, work, volunteering. But I felt worn out, restless, and lonely in a way that didn't make sense.*
>
> *A friend recommended this book to me and said, "Start with the chapter about codependency. Just trust me." So I did. I remember*

sitting on my couch, flipping straight to that section like it was a shortcut to fixing my life. And honestly—some of it hit immediately. The overgiving. The way I could sense someone's mood from across the room. The way I'd take responsibility for keeping everything okay.

What surprised me was what surfaced underneath that.

As I read, I kept thinking, Why does this feel so familiar? Not just the behaviors—the feelings underneath them. The fear that if I didn't stay useful or easy to love, I'd get left.

So I started at the beginning. Reading the abandonment chapter hit hard. I would never have said "I was abandoned" or even thought of my life that way. People were there… but I felt alone. Even as a child, it just seemed like instinct to need less, ask less, feel less. I could read the room, be "low maintenance," be independent - take care of myself. But that chapter made me see that my lies were: I'm not important. I'm a burden. Don't take up space. Don't need too much. Don't expect anyone to stay.

I began to see that this message didn't just shape my relationships. It shaped how I coped—something the chapter on addiction made me see clearly. At first, I didn't want to call my drinking an "addiction." That seemed too big for my life. But I was using alcohol to numb. Not always. Not every day. But predictably—when I felt anxious, rejected, lonely, overwhelmed. It helped quiet my mind. It helped me stop feeling. And it worked. For a little while.

But after the numb wore off, the ache was still there—and then I also had shame. Shame about needing it. Shame about not being stronger. Shame about the things I said or did when I drank too much.

I wanted this book to give me a clean ending. I wanted a neat before-and-after. It helped to hear that healing doesn't work like that.

It's not a one-and-done thing. It comes in layers.

My first next step wasn't some dramatic transformation. It was one honest sentence to one safe person: "I think I'm using alcohol to cope, and I don't want to do that anymore." My voice shook when I said it. I felt so exposed, so ashamed. But I also felt relieved—like I had finally stopped hiding from myself.

I started counseling. I joined a support group. I learned what my triggers were—especially the abandonment ones—and how my body reacts when I feel unsafe. I practiced healthier ways to cope. I didn't do it perfectly. Sometimes I slipped back into old behaviors. But something was changing: I was noticing sooner. I was pausing sooner. I was choosing something different sooner.

Those changes weren't easy—and honestly, not everyone around me knew what to do with them. But I stopped explaining or trying to make them understand and just stayed focused on getting healthier.

That's what "next steps" have looked like for me. Not a finish line. More like a new direction.

Today, I'm still doing the work. I still have layers. But I'm not stuck anymore. When old behaviors start creeping back, I don't ask, "What's wrong with me?" Instead I ask myself, "What's getting stirred up—and what's my next best step?" I have a plan. I have tools. And I know where to go for help when another layer shows up. I don't have to face it alone.

Healing didn't make my life perfect. But it helped me start dealing with what was really going on. It helped me actually live my life instead of just getting things done. It made me honest with myself. And it gave me hope—and a future that feels possible.

—Tina

5. What part of Tina's story stood out most to you? Why?

6. Tina described part of her change as "noticing sooner… pausing sooner… choosing differently sooner." What would "sooner" look like for you this month?

7. What is one situation where you'd like to practice a pause before you react or cope?

8. Finish this sentence: "Hope would look like _____
_____
_____
_____in my life right now."

Preparing for Pushback

Sometimes, growth comes with pushback, like Tina experienced—not because changing is wrong, but because your old patterns likely made life more comfortable for others.

When you stop overfunctioning, someone may feel the absence of your rescuing. When you stop people-pleasing or stop keeping harmful secrets, someone may notice you're not as easy to pull into old roles. When you stop drinking heavily, someone may say, "you're not fun anymore." And when you start setting boundaries, someone may try to test whether you mean it.

Sometimes the pushback is internal—you resist the changes you want to make. The old urge to numb, escape, or shut down may show up when you feel stressed, exposed, or misunderstood. And sometimes it's fear—because setting boundaries and speaking truth can feel risky. The discomfort can tempt you to go back to what's familiar.

9. Who do you think might push back as you start making changes? A particular person? Multiple people? Yourself?

When pushback comes—whether it's from someone else or yourself—the first thing that can help is simply to name what's happening. Recognize the pull to return to old patterns before you act on it. You may be tempted to respond the way you usually would—or to explain, defend, argue, or apologize for trying to change. Instead, you might tell yourself: *"This is pressure to go back to an old behavior. But I don't have to do that. I can choose something different."*

It also helps to have a few short, simple responses ready. Not a speech or the perfect words, just something you can say when your heart is pounding. You might try: *"I can't do that, but I can do this,"* or *"I'm working on making healthier choices,"* or *"I'm not discussing that right now."*

Expect to be tested—and plan for it. Boundaries aren't just what you say—they're what you do next. If someone keeps pushing, you can repeat yourself once, then follow through. If the conversation turns disrespectful, you can end it. If they keep demanding, you can pause and step away. If they punish you with silence, you don't have to chase them. Stay calm, steady, and clear.

Change is hard. And it doesn't come instantly. Think about when you're most likely to feel pulled to your familiar behaviors—maybe late at night, after a conflict, or when you feel rejected—and make a plan before it hits. Ask yourself, *what's one healthy thing I can do first? Who is someone safe I can text or call? Where can I go for a few minutes to breathe and reset—even if that's the bathroom or yard?*

Pushback is often louder when you're facing it by yourself. One steady person—a friend, mentor, counselor, or group—can change that. You could say, *"Here's what I'm practicing this week. Can you check on me?"* Sometimes the most powerful part of change is not doing it alone.

Pushback can be uncomfortable. It can also be proof that something

is changing. You're building something new — slowly, steadily, intentionally. And one step at a time, what's healthy can start to feel normal.

10. What would it look like to choose "getting healthier" over "being understood" in one relationship right now?

11. Brainstorm how you could respond or what steps you could take when you feel pushback—from others or yourself.

Faith for the Journey

Faith can be a foundation and strength for you in this process. God isn't asking you to heal through sheer willpower or perfect choices. He invites you into a relationship with Him—into a love that doesn't rise and fall based on your performance or your progress.

Sometimes we wish God would hand us a map for our lives. But Scripture says, *"Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105 NIV)*. A lamp doesn't light miles ahead—it lights the next step. That's often how healing works too: one step, one choice, one raw moment at a time.

Often this starts with honesty, especially when you're tired, feeling challenged, or frustrated with your progress: *"God, I'm here. I don't know what to do next. Show me the next best step for me."*

And when the waves feel loud—fear, temptation, pushback—hold onto this promise: *"Do not fear…I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you…" (Isaiah 41:10 NIV)* He meets you in the middle of real life—messy emotions, complicated stories, unfinished healing—and He stays firm.

And each root layer and healing you work on helps you live more like who God made you to be—steadier, freer, and more at peace.

12. How can you invite God into your next steps?

Keep Growing! A Seed of Encouragement

— from Kendra

When I finished Unraveled Roots, I just sat there with the book closed in my lap for a minute. I remember thinking, Okay… now what? Like, I can't unread what I just read.

I didn't feel magically better. I didn't suddenly have all this energy and clarity. Honestly, I felt kind of tender—like I'd been poking at a bruise I didn't know I had.

The next morning was a regular day. Same people. Same stress. Same little things that usually set me off. And I had this moment where I could feel myself reaching for the old way—shut down, distract, smooth it over, pretend I was fine. It was so automatic.

But I had this tiny pause. And that was new.

I didn't do anything major. I just did one small thing different. I texted one safe person and said, "Hey… I'm not okay today. I'm feeling a little raw after working through that book." That was it. No long explanation. No trying to make it sound pretty.

Later that day, something else happened that felt small but was huge for me: I didn't fix something that wasn't mine to

IN HER WORDS

"I didn't do anything major. I just did one small thing different."
- Kendra

> *fix. I wanted to. My whole body wanted to. But I didn't. I just let it be uncomfortable. I'm not saying that solved everything. It didn't. But when I went to bed that night, I remember thinking, "Oh. I can actually change."*
>
> *I'm still in it. I still have more to work on. But I feel like I have room to breathe now—and I didn't have that before.*
>
> *That's the best way I can say it. I'm not "finished." But I am moving forward. One real step at a time.*

Seeds to Carry Forward

One line that stood out to me…

One hopeful truth I want to remember…

One small step I can take this week…

Final Thoughts

You started this *Unraveled Roots* journey with a hope that the pain, scars, and confusion of the past could lose their grip on you. That by working through the roots of your past, you could open up and begin to grow and flourish. Most importantly, you chose to do the hard work and start changing your life— and potentially the legacy you leave for others. It was a decision that took a tremendous amount of courage. You can be proud of the work you've accomplished along the way.

Be kind to yourself as you journey forward. You didn't get here overnight. And healthier behaviors and patterns won't happen overnight either. You'll have ups and downs. You may even feel like giving up at times. But keep going. It's worth it. YOU are worth it.

Remember: There *is* hope. Change *is* possible. Life *can be* different.

Blessings for the Journey Forward

May you carry forward what you've gained here—clarity, courage, and the ability to pause.

May you grow in steadiness when old feelings rise up.

May you find words for what's happening inside you and wisdom for what to do next.

May you be surrounded by safe people—steady voices who remind you of what's true.

May you take the next step when it's small, and take it again when it's hard.

And may God strengthen you for the work ahead, meeting you with grace that is new every morning.

Prayer

Lord, thank You for bringing me this far. Thank You for what You've shown me—about my story, my roots, and the ways I've tried to cope.

GARDENER TIP

Growth isn't always a green shoot breaking the soil. Sometimes growth is the root pushing deeper into the dark to find a more reliable water source.

As I step forward from here, give me wisdom for what's next. You know the layers of my story that are still tender. Help me to not be discouraged when another root surfaces, but to see it as an invitation to deeper healing. Help me notice the moments when old patterns start to pull at me, and give me the strength to pause and choose something healthier. When I feel tender or unsure, meet me with Your steady love. When I feel overwhelmed, remind me that I don't have to do everything at once. Just help me take the next step.

Lead me to the right people—a safe friend, a mentor, therapist, group, or church community—who will walk with me. Give me the courage to stay on the path, even when it's hard.

Grow something good in my life, Lord—something steady and lasting. Make me rooted in You.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion…"

Philippians 1:6 NIV

resources

Support After Abortion

If you want to go deeper in your abortion healing journey, we're here for you. We'll listen with compassion and without judgment. And, we can offer options and connect you to the type of healing you prefer. It could be virtual or in-person; group, one-on-one, or independent; counseling, peer-facilitated, or self-guided; religious or secular. Contact us at:

Online chat and resources: supportafterabortion.com
Call or text: 844-289-HOPE (4673)
Email: help@supportafterabortion.com

Specific Issues

If you're looking to explore other types of healing—for whatever might have surfaced for you—this list might be a helpful starting point to find your next step.

Al-Anon
888-425-2666 | www.al-anon.org

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
212-870-3400 | www.aa.org

Celebrate Recovery
www.celebraterecovery.com

Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA)
888-444-2359 | www.coda.org

Divorce Care
800-489-7778 | www.divorcecare.org

Grief.com
www.grief.com

GriefShare
800-395-5755 | griefshare.org

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
818-773-9999 | www.na.org

National Alliance for Eating Disorders
866-662-1235
allianceforeatingdisorders.com

National Alliance on Mental Illness
800-950-6264 | nami.org/nami-helpline

National Center on Elder Abuse
855-500-3537 | ncea.acl.gov

National Child Abuse Hotline
800-422-4453 | childhelp.org/hotline/

National Domestic Violence Hotline
800-799-7233 | www.thehotline.org

National HumanTrafficking Hotline
888-373-7888 | Text 233733
humantraffickinghotline.org

National Mental Health Hotline
866-903-3787
www.mentalhealthhotline.org

National Problem Gambling Helpline
800-GAMBLER | www.ncpgambling.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
988 | www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline
866-331-9474

Overeaters Anonymous (OA)
505-891-2664 | www.oa.org

Porn Addicts Anonymous (PAA)
www.pornaddictsanonymous.org

RAINN: Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network
800-656-4673 | www.rainn.org

Sex Addicts Anonymous
713-869-4902 | www.saa-recovery.org

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notes