Healing the Wounds of Your Past

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Healing the Wounds of Your Past

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Introduction

Welcome to “Healing the Wounds of Your Past.” This class is designed to walk you through the healing process for your childhood and adulthood wounds.

There will be lecture, written exercises and sharing all designed to provide opportunities for you to apply the concepts to your wounds.

In just five weeks, you may not be able to complete the healing process with all your wounds, but the steps you need to take will be available to you so you can continue to work through your wounds on your own or with the help of a therapist.

If you need to spend more time on a step in this process, go back to that and work through it on your own after the class. If you do not finish an exercise in class, please take the time to finish it on your own before the next class. If you miss a class, please listen to the lecture and do the written exercises before the next class as the material builds on the previous lesson. If you think of further information you would like to explore from a lesson, prioritize journaling about it so you will work through the things that are coming up for you emotionally. The more you put into the process, the more you will get out of it.

If you haven’t dealt with your wounds before and have experienced significant hurts and traumas, you may find the memories and feelings overwhelming. If this is the case, take it slow and consider getting professional support to work through them during or after this class.

It is my prayer that you will find healing from the hurts that continue to fester in your heart, soul and spirit.

Blessings,

Karla
Week 1: The Wounds of Your Childhood

*Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not turn from it.*

**Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)**

“I’ve prayed for years for God to take away the pain I have from my father’s abuse and to help me forgive him, but it hasn’t happened.”

“I just can’t seem to move past my divorce. It still hurts so much.”

“After the divorce, my husband convinced two of my children that it was my fault, so they have nothing to do with me. How is this fair? Why does God let this happen?

“My business partner’s betrayal left me with debt that caused me to lose my house and forced me to declare bankruptcy. How can I get past my bitterness?”

“My mother has always favored my brother and now she is favoring his kids over mine. She gives them money and extravagant gifts and takes them on vacation while she gives us hardly anything. I am angry and hurt.”

“My best friend had an affair with my spouse. They are now happily married and take my kids on vacations I can’t afford. How can I forgive them?”

“I stayed in a difficult marriage for thirty years. Not only did I waste years of my own life, I hurt my children and I hate myself for it. I can see them struggling in their own relationships and it hurts me to see it.”

“It was my fault that my son was killed. I pulled out in front of the truck that hit us. How do you get over the loss of a child when it is your own fault?”

Wounds are a part of living in a fallen world full of fallen people. Salvation offers us a promise of eternal life but doesn’t guarantee we won’t suffer in this life. The Bible tells us we are a new creation when we are saved but that doesn’t mean all our hurts and wounds are instantly healed. And no matter how hard we pray God doesn’t force people to do what He wants them to do. People have free will, and they get to choose for themselves.

Our wounds are ours to deal with. God has created us with minds, memories, emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. Our wounds affect us in each of those areas. Healing is a complex process that we participate in. For God to instantly heal our wounds, He would have to remove the memories of our past experiences. That would change who we are and wouldn’t be healthy. It also isn’t the way God works. He operates on orderly principles where cause and effect go together. The
things that have happened to us produce an effect. It is healthier for us to work through them than for God to remove them.

Romans 8:26 tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us with our weaknesses or infirmities. The word in the Greek is *astheneia* which literally means “want of strength.” The Counselor (Holy Spirit) comes along beside us and partners with us by showing us truth (John 16:5-16) and giving us comfort (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Our High Priest, Jesus, understands our pain. Hebrews 4:15-16 (NIV) says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” We know that Jesus, as a human, walking on this Earth experienced every emotion we have and suffered through temptation, rejection and emotional pain. We are not alone in our journey to heal our wounds.

Pause for a moment and ask the Holy Spirit to lead you into truth and for Jesus, your sympathetic and empathetic High Priest, to give you the grace and mercy you need as you work through this process of healing your emotional wounds.

What are our wounds? They are actions or a series of actions by another person that cause deep psychological pain with real life consequences. Because we are emotional people, the wounds often cause deep pain which makes them difficult to heal unless we go through an intentional healing process.

To heal, we must be willing to face the truth about our pasts. This means we open ourselves up to the pain and walk through it to get to the other side where the wound is cleaned out before it is closed and healed. This includes letting it go by grieving the losses we have endured and by offering forgiveness for ourselves and others.

**Types of Dysfunctional Family Problems**

When did our wounds begin? It was in our families of origin that we first experienced hurt. Even the most well-meaning parents made mistakes, but when we are exposed to things like addictions, mental illness, personality disorders, abandonment, trauma, abuse, and divorce, we end up with even deeper wounds.

There are many types of dysfunctional family problems. Most families have more than one of these and quite a few have many of them.

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Circle the ones that were present in your family of origin, even if it was only one member who did it.

Abandonment (emotional and/or physical)
Addictions (alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food, shopping, gaming, sports)
Affairs
Abuse (verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, financial, and spiritual)
Anger (raging, passive-aggressive, hostile)
Mental Illness (depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, narcissism, borderline, ADHD, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders and more)
Manipulation and Control
Chronic Physical Illness
Rejection
Favoritism
Workaholism and Other Excesses
Irresponsibility
Spiritual Mismatch
General Dysfunction
Divorce
Step Family issues
Economic Issues
Single Parenting
Differences in parenting styles
Cultural differences, personality differences, differences in family of origin
Death
Others

Which problems did your family have? ______________________________________________
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Children are dependent upon the adults in their lives to meet all their needs. Here are what children need to grow up to be healthy adults. Circle the ones that you did not receive growing up.

- Physical needs met
- Healthy modeling of emotions
- Validation of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions
- Guidance in how to identify feelings
- Affirmation and praise
- Physical, emotional, social, and sexual safety
- Attention
- Affection
- Mirroring (reflecting back what the child is experiencing)
- Physical, emotional, social, psychological and mental needs met
- Modeling of healthy gender roles
- Trustworthy relationships
- Unconditional love
- Respect for personal boundaries
- Acceptance of individuality with freedom to explore
- Self-discipline and delayed gratification taught and modeled
- Modeling of self-care and self-respect
- Healthy communication and conflict resolution
- Structured limits
- Predictability

Total the number of needs that were not met as a child. Divide the number by two and then times that number by ten to get the percentage of your needs that were not met.

Write that percentage of unmet needs here: ____________%

When children’s needs aren’t met, they get the message that their needs aren’t important and conclude they don’t matter.

How were you affected by your unmet needs as a child?

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Some of these needs are survival needs so they figure out how to get them met. They may act out, take on the role of a victim, develop illnesses, become the adult, align with one parent, go outside the family for support and more.

How did you get your unmet needs met on your own?

Dysfunctional Family Roles

“Dysfunction” means that something isn’t working right. People adjust to make it work. Even children intuitively know what needs to be done to stabilize the family system and themselves. One of the things that happens in dysfunctional families is that children take on one or more roles to help the family function. When the child goes through adolescence, the roles may change.

Here are common roles children assume:

Hero. The hero is the child who does everything right. Good grades, high achievements, and superior functioning make the family look great to outsiders. This way, the family has something to be proud of and someone to point to that makes them feel okay about themselves.

Which child played this role and how?
**Responsible Child.** This child notices that one or both parents aren’t handling certain responsibilities in the home, so the child takes on those duties including taking care of the parent(s) and siblings.

Which child played this role and how?

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**Mascot.** This child responds to the seriousness in the home by making people laugh to feel better. This child becomes good at lightening the mood and diverting attention from the serious stuff.

Which child played this role and how?

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**Rebel.** This child sacrifices himself/herself by acting out with bad behavior. This bad behavior often allows the otherwise-divided parents to unite to fix this child. The child is also acting out pain.

Which child played this role and how?

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**Scapegoat.** The family blames the stress and problems on this child instead of on the dysfunction in the home. This child is also called the identified patient because the focus is on fixing him instead of the real problems.

Which child played this role and how?

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**Lost Child.** The lost child looks around, sees everything going on and decides it is best to remain as quiet as possible by meeting his own needs. This child may also be involved outside the home with friends and activities.

Which child played this role and how?______________________________________________

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**Adjuster.** The adjuster fixes things as much as possible to hold things together. This child reduces conflict by smoothing it over and mediating between other members.

Which child played this role and how?______________________________________________

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**Prince/Princess.** Dysfunctional families often pick one child as the favorite. This child gets more attention, praise and material things than the others.

Which child played this role and how?______________________________________________

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These roles aren’t healthy because they originate from the need to keep a dysfunctional family functioning and they limit emotions, interactions, roles, and development. Children need to experience all their emotions and play different roles in the family. They need to develop balance and be able to care for others and themselves. They need to feel free to speak the truth. The other problem is that the roles often continue into adulthood and cause their adult relationships to be unhealthy.

Some things children do to survive are unhealthy and become maladaptive patterns as adults. Denying emotions makes sense when you aren’t able to express them as a child but isn’t helpful when you are an adult and allowed to feel them. Denying your needs makes sense when there is no one there to meet them and you can’t do much about it as a child but continuing to deny
yourself as an adult isn’t necessary. Not trusting people who aren’t trustworthy makes sense; not trusting anyone doesn’t work for the rest of your life.

**Your Inner Child**

Silvan Tomkins, a research psychologist, identifies six primary motivator emotions that keep us connected to our environment and protect our basic needs. They are surprise, interest, enjoyment, fear, distress, and anger. These are universal and recognizable in every ethnicity.

Healthy families encourage emotional expression; dysfunctional families teach children to suppress their emotions by shaming them when they are expressed. Children are told things like “Don’t be a crybaby,” “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about,” “What are you so happy about?,” “Don’t be a fraidy cat,” “Quit complaining,” “Don’t be so emotional,” “Don’t raise your voice at me,” and more. Children need their emotions mirrored back to them along with positive validation such as, “I can see you are afraid/ angry/ surprised/ happy/ distressed/ interested. What is going on?” They also need the adults in their lives to model how to handle their emotions. When these things don’t happen, children suppress and repress their emotions.

Shame-based parents shame their children’s emotions and needs. From this, their children also become shame-based and deny their own feelings and needs.

When we experience a dysfunctional childhood where our needs are not met, where we experienced traumas, and where our feelings were repressed, we grow up to have a wounded inner child. This child spontaneously pops up in our adult lives.

The inner child acts up in the adult’s life by:

- Finding relationships that replay the same dynamics to hopefully repair the past by getting it right in the present.
- Treating other people the way the child was treated.
- Behaving childlike with temper tantrums, pouting, raging, throwing things etc.
- Self-punishing with the same punishments received as a child.
- Turning emotions inward which causes depression, anxiety, apathy, etc. as well as physical illnesses.
- Believing beyond hope that things will magically change.
- Continuing to live according to the false self (developed as a child).
- Fearing abandonment.
- Inappropriate rebelliousness.
- Addictive and compulsive behaviors.
- Demanding instant gratification.
- Being self-willed and stubborn.
- Being impatient and undisciplined.
• People pleasing.
• Being overly controlled and obedient.
• Self-centeredness.

The inner child will be powerful in our lives until we embrace our wounded and hurt inner child. We must first acknowledge that our inner child exists. Then we finish the unfinished processing of our childhood wounds by doing grief work where we process the pain.

Trauma needs to be processed. Emotions help process and resolve trauma. When emotions are prohibited, trauma isn’t processed. The unresolved experiences cause overly intense reactions to things in the present.

The following exercise will give you an opportunity to think about your wounded inner child and to begin the work of addressing that child.

Write a letter to your inner child from your adult child. Your adult child will be expressing thoughts about your inner child’s emotions and experiences growing up. If you have trouble doing this, look at a picture or pictures of yourself as a child to help you remember what you were experiencing. You can also write letters to your inner child at different ages or during different experiences.

Give your inner child a name: ____________________________

Give your adult child a name: ____________________________

Dear ________________,

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Write a letter to your adult from your inner child. Your inner child will express how hard it has been to not express her/his emotions and hurts and how hard it has been to have to live restricted and unable to freely express surprise, interest, enjoyment, fear, distress, and anger. Your child will also explain how hard it has been to live by the rules that have been put on him/her that have carried over from your dysfunctional family. Address why the inner child is acting out and why.

Dear ________________.

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If doing this helped you but isn’t enough, there are other resources that can help you heal your inner child. They will be listed in the resource list.
Week 2: The Wounds of Your Adulthood

*Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy.*

**Proverbs 14:10 (NIV)**

We not only have wounds from our childhoods, we also have wounds from our adult lives.

**Adult Wounds**

Wounds in our adult lives take many forms and come from many people including our family of origin, our children, our spouses, our business partners, our co-workers, our friends, our acquaintances, our employers, and even strangers.

Here are some examples of adult wounds. Circle the ones you’ve experienced as an adult yourself or as a problem with your parents, siblings, children, or spouse:

- Betrayal
- Sexual Abuse
- Financial abuse
- False Accusations
- Favoritism
- Abortion
- Affairs
- Physical Abuse
- Rejection
- Cheating
- Verbal & Emotional Abuse
- Physical harm
- Stealing
- Harm to a Family Member
- Rape
- Infertility
- Loneliness
- Divorce
- Indifference
- Gossiping/Breaking confidence
- Abandonment
- Control
- Manipulation
- Lies
- Losing a job
- Losing your home
- Losing a loved one
- Mental Illness
- Chronic Illness
- Addiction
- Anger
- Passive-Aggressive Anger
- Narcissism
- Withholding grandchildren
- Withholding children
- Borderline Personality
- Problems between your spouse and your children
- Death
- Homosexuality

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Guilt Vs. Shame

We carry the wounds from our childhood into our adult lives. Many of the decisions we make as adults are a product of that unresolved pain. One of the ways that our childhood is brought into our adult lives is through shame.

Guilt is what we feel when we believe we have done something wrong. It is healthy when it motivates us to repent and do what we need to do to correct a wrong. We can then let go of the guilt. Healthy shame is what we feel when we are embarrassed at being caught doing something we know is wrong.

Toxic shame is what we feel when we believe we are inadequate and defective as a human being. Toxic shame makes us hide. When it is internalized, it becomes our core identity and main feeling. This means any time we feel a need, drive or feeling that toxic shame pops up and because it feels so bad, we do something to avoid having to feel it. Toxic shame also keeps us from trusting our thoughts, feelings, and desires.

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are ego defenses that help us not to feel painful feelings including shame. Defenses protected us from pain as children but prevent us from experiencing full lives as adults.

Here are some types of defense mechanisms:

Denial is a protective form of deception resulting from the inability or unwillingness to see truth you are unable to face.

Repression is not allowing yourself to feel painful and uncomfortable/unacceptable emotions. There is a fear that if the emotions are expressed that you won’t be able to control them, and they will be overwhelming. You will also feel shame for expressing them.
**Dissociation/Depersonalization** is an out of body experience where you disconnect from yourself and feel disconnected from your inner experiences.

**Conversion** takes an unacceptable feeling or thought and converts it into an acceptable feeling or physical symptom/illness.

**Projection** denies a part of yourself by projecting it onto someone else.

**People pleasing** protects you by keeping you from risking rejection and disapproval.

**Caretaking/Codependency** allows you to focus on another person to avoid focusing on yourself.

**Addictions and compulsions** are engaged in to avoid painful feelings.

**Fantasy** allows you to escape your painful reality by pretending your reality is something else.

**Chronic victimhood** means you don’t have to take responsibility for yourself.

**Victimizing others** makes you feel powerful.

**A False Self** allows you to hide behind the false image you created as a child to protect you from facing the truth about yourself.

**Acting shameless** occurs when you take your feeling of shame and transfer it onto other people by:

- Controlling them.
- Expecting them to be perfect and shaming them when they aren’t.
- Condemning them.
- Raging at them.
- Criticizing them.
- Judging them and moralizing.
- Blaming them for your actions.
- Acting superior to them.
- Showing them contempt (disgust).
- Patronizing them (offering your help while acting morally superior).

Look over the types of defenses and write down the ones you use. Beside each one, write why you think you use it.

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Inner Voice

Within each of us, we have an inner voice that repeats the words and training we received as children. For those of us who are shame-based, the voice is primarily negative and critical. We hear things like “You’ll never amount to anything,” “No one will love you,” “You always do the wrong thing.” It is also composed of the family rules that were transmitted to us such as “Don’t make mistakes,” “Don’t trust,” “Don’t talk,” “Don’t take risks,” “Don’t be selfish,” “Don’t feel,” and “Don’t tell anyone.”

We need to identify the messages our inner voices are giving us so we can replace them with healthy messages.

What are some of the messages your inner voice tells you that reflect what you were told as a child?
What messages can you replace them with?

Good Vs. Bad

The people who hurt us aren’t all bad. They have good and redeeming qualities along with the bad ones and the bad doesn’t erase the good.
When we are processing our wounds, it is important that we figure out what to do with the good stuff along with the bad. We have good memories and bad memories. People hurt us, but they also gave us some good things including some positive lessons and experiences.

Write about the good attributes the person has and the good things you experienced with him/her.

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Feelings

If we, as children, had a supportive environment to grieve our wounds, we wouldn’t have become shame-based people. All we needed was someone to listen and validate our feelings and the time to go through the grief process. Because we didn’t get to feel the emotions, we have stored up emotional energy that needs to be released. Grief work primarily involves feeling hurt, remorse, depression, sadness, anger and loneliness. Once grief work is complete, it often stops the reenactment of our primary wounds and compulsive/addictive lifestyles.

Circle which of the following emotions you were not allowed to feel as a child.

anger                   sadness                   joy
fear                    disappointment                frustration
jealousy                curiosity                   hurt
playfulness             confidence                  weakness
impatience              worry                      excitement
affection               spontaneity                boredom

Now go back and put a check mark by each emotion you have trouble expressing as an adult.

What did you learn by doing this exercise about feelings? ____________________________
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Week 3: Grieving Your Wounds

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Psalm 42:11 (NIV)

Core Wounds

There are things we all need in order to be healthy mentally, emotionally and relationally. These are referred to as core needs. Check yes or no to indicate whether you did or did not have the need met as a child and then as an adult in your primary relationships.

Here is a list of core needs:

- To be valued
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be heard
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be appreciated
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be needed
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be loved
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be understood
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be acknowledged
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be wanted
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___
- To be approved
  - Child: Yes ___ No ___
  - Adult: Yes ___ No ___

When your core needs are not met, you develop core wounds. These core wounds are unmet needs that drive your behavior. You will also be emotionally reactive to anything that triggers those unmet needs.

Looking back over the list of needs that weren’t met, which ones are core wounds that you carry today? If you aren’t certain, identify the ones that cause you to be most reactive when they aren’t met. ________________________________________________________________

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Are there any core wounds that you recognize that you used to carry but that have been healed through healthy relationships and self-growth?

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Losses

We all have losses in our lives. Not all our losses are related to something someone has done to us. Some are the result of living in a world with sickness and death. All of us have hopes and dreams, some of which are unrealized. We have wounds and hurts from childhood and from our adult lives from dysfunction and broken relationships. When we have too many losses, we can lose hope and become discouraged even to the point of despair.

To help identify your losses, ask yourself what you wish had been different. Write about the losses that you have experienced including the loss of your hopes and dreams.
Share your losses with another person. Ask the person listening to validate your hurt and pain.

Where Was God?

Some people get stuck by not understanding why God allowed bad things into their lives. They feel that God has betrayed them especially when they prayed for God to intervene or to guide them to make the right decision. They know God can do anything and wonder why He sat by and watched them get hurt.

This comes from misunderstanding who God is and what the Bible teaches. Nothing is impossible with God, but He created people with free will. He doesn’t force people to change and He doesn’t reach into their minds and rearrange their thoughts, impulses, personalities, and choices.
When we ask God to guide us to make the right decision, we assume that we will. We forget that the decisions we make are also influenced by our own needs, perceptions, personalities, and wounds. Just because we make the wrong decision doesn’t mean that God made us do it. For instance, we are attracted to people who have the same level of health as we do. If we had dysfunctional families, it is highly likely we will end up marrying someone similarly dysfunctional. Part of our woundedness is played out as a reenactment of our trauma to gain mastery over it. An example of this is an abuse victim marrying an abuser to finally be able to stand up and say no to abuse and get the abuser to stop unlike.

Because God doesn’t miraculously spare us from pain doesn’t mean He doesn’t care. His heart is as broken when He sees any one of us suffering as our hearts hurt when we see our own children in pain (Exodus 2:24-25). This world is under the curse of sin. Hurt people hurt people. Dysfunction comes from sin. We will be affected by it as long as the world is under the curse of sin.

The redemption God promises is that He uses everything that happens to us for His glory and for our good (Romans 8:28) but that doesn’t mean that the actual event was good only that good can come from it. Anything we go through can be used to change us for the better and to help us rely on God. Both of those are scriptural truths that we can embrace for our lives.

It isn’t shocking to God that we question where He was or that we feel anger toward Him. He knows and He still loves us. He wants us to work out our relationship with Him by being honest.

Write a letter to God about how you feel toward Him for allowing you to be wounded. Be honest.

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The Grief Process

Elisabeth Kübler Ross originally described the five stages of grief as a process of adjustment when faced with one’s own imminent death. The stages are now commonly viewed as necessary when one experiences any kind of loss.

At this point in the class, you may want to focus on one relationship or one event to focus on as you work through the grief and forgiveness processes.

Here are the first four stages with a focus on how they relate to our wounds:
1. **Denial/shock**: You may still want to minimize what happened by telling yourself it wasn’t that bad or even to pretend it didn’t happen, but to work through your wounds, you must recognize that it was that bad. To have traumatic things happen to you, to not have your developmental needs met, to live with dysfunction—all these things are that bad.

Write about your denial and then move toward affirming that what happened did happen and that it was/is bad.

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2. **Anger**: You must allow yourself to feel anger about what happened to you. At this point, you don’t try to figure out if it was intentional or unintentional, you just experience the feelings you have at the injustice of it all. It is important that you don’t repress the anger because you feel guilty about having it. God and Jesus both feel anger about what happened to you too.

Write about the anger that you feel toward the injustice of what happened to you. ____________

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3. **Bargaining/Remorse**: It’s natural to try to figure out what could have prevented all of it from happening. If only ____ had done____, it wouldn’t have been that way. You may think about what you could have done differently. You may focus on thinking of ways each person could have done something different that would have changed things. You may even fantasize about how God could have intervened.

Write about the thoughts you have about the people and things that could have prevented it from happening. ______________________________________________________________

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4. **Sadness:** You feel the sadness, emptiness, depression, and loss physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. This is the stage that feels hopeless and is most commonly thought of as grief, yet it is only part of it. You feel the sadness over what happened and over the loss of what could have been and should have been.

Write about the sadness you feel when you think of what happened to you.

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Recognize the stages and give yourself time to work through them. You can go in and out of the different phases and back and forth in any order. Any time you experience a new awareness of a loss that you haven’t grieved or a new aspect of a loss you’ve grieved, you may need to go through the process again.
Week 4: Walking Your Wounds Through the Forgiveness Process

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

Colossians 3:13 (NIV)

What Is and Is Not Forgiveness?

There are many misunderstandings about forgiveness that make it harder than it already is. Clearing them up will make the forgiveness process easier.

Forgiveness is Not Excusing or Condoning

People often have the feeling that by forgiving they are approving of the actions of the offender. This is not the case. Forgiveness is not the same as overlooking, excusing, and condoning. By the very fact that you need to forgive, it means something bad was done. You aren’t saying it was okay.

Forgiveness is Not Dependent on Repentance

Forgiveness is not dependent on repentance because if it were, the offender would be able to determine your ability to forgive. You can even forgive someone who is passed away because forgiveness happens inside you.

It is easier to forgive when someone is repentant, but it is not necessary. Forgiveness is a decision that you make unrelated to what the offender does.

 Forgiveness is Not Reconciliation

Just because you forgive doesn’t mean you have to reconcile. You have the right to choose whether you want to reconcile. If the person is unrepentant and the behavior is likely to occur again, you might need to protect yourself with boundaries.

God’s forgiveness of us as sinners is tied to reconciliation. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 5:19: “That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them,” but in order to be reconciled, we must repent and confess. This repentance signifies the wish to be in relationship with God.

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Forgiveness is Not Weakness

It takes a stronger character to forgive than to hold a grudge. Human nature seeks retaliation. Even small children instinctively hit back when hurt. It is part of our survival instinct to protect ourselves, yet God wants to turn that weakness into strength through the taking on of His nature. The acts of the sinful nature include bitterness, rage and anger, but in Christ we learn compassion, kindness and forgiveness (Eph. 4:31-32).

It is through the power of not taking revenge and loving your enemies that you fulfill the higher law of love that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43-48). Romans 12:17-21 says that when you give up your right to seek revenge, you allow God to deal with the person, but when you take revenge, you make your anger and resentment the force. It doesn’t work. God has asked you to fight evil by overcoming it with good. Part of that good is forgiveness instead of payback.

If someone is misinterpreting your forgiveness as weakness and trying to exploit you through it, then you need to take care of yourself with appropriate boundaries. You can’t control how someone views your actions, but you can control your choices. And if someone is continuing to do the same thing to you, you need to set boundaries before you work on forgiveness.

Forgiveness is Not Denial

Forgiveness is not avoiding the problem or denying that the painful event occurred. It isn’t refusing to talk about it hoping that it will just go away on its own. Denial involves the refusal to admit the truth. You cannot forgive unless you first admit the truth about the offense you are forgiving. The process of forgiveness involves looking at how the offense affected you and then facing the pain.

Forgiveness is Not Superiority

The person who forgives is not superior to the one forgiven. True forgiveness is motivated by compassion, empathy, and mercy, the opposite of a spirit of superiority or self-grandiosity. Paul admonished the Galatians to restore a brother caught in sin gently, keeping in mind that they might also be tempted (Gal. 6:1). The way you prevent yourself from feeling superior is to remember that you are also imperfect and in need of God’s forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a Choice

No offender can demand forgiveness from the offended. Forgiveness is given voluntarily. It is not a feeling; it is a decision of the will. People often report a great sense of relief when they
make the choice to forgive, as if a heavy weight is lifted off. Sometimes you have to ask God to make you willing to be willing to forgive if you aren’t there yet.

**Forgiveness is Letting Go of Revenge**

Forgiveness is granting the offender a release from the obligation to repay a debt thereby leaving room for God to judge. Forgiveness is not letting people off the hook; it is allowing the only one who has the right to judge to do it. Jesus warned us in Matthew 7:1-2 not to judge. The Greek word for *judge* is *krino*, meaning “to assume the office of a judge.” A judge pronounces a sentence after declaring guilt. This does not mean we cannot evaluate the behavior of others by God’s standard though, as we are called to keep each other accountable; what we cannot do is pronounce judgment and condemnation when we see sin because we are sinners too or figure out how to make sure the person suffers as we have.

**Forgiveness is Unlimited**

If forgiveness is limited to a finite number of times, then it is not forgiveness. God does not set a limit on the number of times He will forgive us. He does not remember the previous sins and is therefore, not keeping track (Ps. 103:12). “Love keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5), so it cannot keep a tally. When Peter asked Jesus how many times he was required to forgive (Matt. 18:21), Jesus told him seventy-seven times. Jesus’ point was not to count the number of times you forgive, but that forgiveness is to be practiced as a way of life. It must be noted that this would not prevent someone from looking at the facts of a person’s record to establish a pattern to make an intelligent decision that a person was not trustworthy or safe, necessitating boundaries for protection.

**Forgiveness is Reciprocal**

Christians forgive because God forgave them (Col. 3:13). People forgive easier when they have been forgiven, especially when they understand their brokenness and sinful nature. They often refuse to forgive when they have been judged harshly. Often some of the most judgmental people are those who have been criticized from childhood. The offering of forgiveness in a broken relationship often results in the other party also apologizing for their wrongs. However, there is no guarantee that a person you forgive will forgive you.

Jesus told a parable about a servant with a large debt that was forgiven. This servant subsequently refused to forgive the debt of the man who owed him a significantly less amount. The king who forgave the servant’s debt was angry and threw him in prison (Matt. 18:23-35). God expects forgiveness to be given when it is received, even going so far as to say that he will not forgive those who do not forgive (Matt 6:14-15). This doesn’t mean that if you are working...
through the process of forgiveness and not there yet that God will send you to hell. The blood of Jesus covers all sins. It means that you need to examine your heart to recognize that you need to work on forgiveness, if you are holding onto bitterness.

The Forgiveness Process

Forgiveness is not something that happens in an instant. It takes time to work through the process if it is to be done right and is truly forgiveness.

For this exercise, choose one person you need to forgive. You may need to focus on just one big issue or one part of a relationship. It will depend on what it is.

Here are the steps of the forgiveness process:

1. You recognize how you have been wounded by the offense and the damage it has done.

You need to answer the following questions:

- How has the offense hurt me?

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• What are the long-term ramifications?

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• What adjustments need to be made?

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• What will I need to live with that will remind me of what was done?

• How am I and other people impacted now and forever?
Once you assess how you have been impacted, you will know what to forgive.

What do you need to forgive?

2. You recognize the part you played, if any.

Forgiveness starts with self-introspection. Even if we had no part to play as children, we did react to it as adults. If it was something done to you as an adult, consider what part you played even if it was only tolerating what was done.
3. You grieve the losses and feel the emotions.

The grief process involves the following stages: denial, anger, blame, sadness, and finally acceptance. The more serious the event the longer it takes to process all the feelings that are necessary to grieve the loss. When you say you have forgiven too soon, you won’t let yourself feel the emotions that must be felt. You will push down anger, blame, and sadness because you believe you must deny yourself the right to feel these negative emotions, if you have forgiven. The grief process is a healing process. You must go through all the stages, sometimes over and over, until you come to a place of acceptance of the loss. Once you accept it, you can live in peace and adjust as necessary to what was done.

Denial

Anger
4. You choose to forgive.

When you have worked through the grief process, you must make a decision: Will you forgive the person for what was done? This is a conscious choice that is made by an act of the will. The
feelings don’t have to be there when you choose to forgive. You can still be angry. You can still feel revengeful and wish the person ill will. When you choose to forgive, you are simply deciding to enter a battle against the natural desire we all have to make someone pay for what was done.

Write your decision to forgive. ____________________________________________________
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5. You change your thinking to let go of the desire to get personal revenge.

When you have been hurt by someone and you are unforgiving, you naturally want to strike back and hurt the person. You want to make the person feel as bad as you feel. You want him or her to suffer in some way as a result of what was done. You want to remember what was done because the negative emotions feel empowering and give you the motivation to get even. Even if you don’t plan to do something, just imagining it feels like you are doing something. Just imagining that the person suffers in some way feels good. This is the thinking that must change.

When you forgive, you are letting go of the desire to get personal revenge. You are relinquishing the right and the desire to personally make the person hurt. And by doing so, you are choosing to move past what has happened. It is important to note that you do not have to relinquish legal justice or interfere with the consequences that naturally occur as a result of what was done.

State that you are relinquishing the right to get personal revenge.
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6. **You empathize with the offender.**

One of the most powerful things you can do to help yourself forgive is to put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Try to understand what drove the person to do what was done. Is there mental illness? Are there difficult or desperate circumstances? Is there emotional woundedness in this person’s life from others? Is there anything that has happened in this person’s life that contributed to this behavior? Empathy allows you to understand and offer grace. It does not excuse the behavior.

What do you think contributed to the offender committing the offense? Why would the person be able/willing/predisposed to do what was done?

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Write about your empathy for the offender.

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7. **You manage your thoughts and continue to forgive rather than allowing thoughts of revenge to resurface when the offense comes into your mind.**

Thoughts will come, especially when you experience something that is a consequence of what was done and when you see the person. Forgiveness isn’t forgetting; it is choosing what to do
with the thoughts when you remember. When the offense comes into your mind, you can choose to stir up the thoughts that will trigger the emotions that will renew your desire for revenge, or you can choose to think thoughts in line with forgiveness. Remind yourself that you have chosen to let go of the negative emotions. Remind yourself that you have decided to treat this person in a way that reflects your forgiveness. Remind yourself that you have come to terms with what has happened. Remind yourself that you will not chain yourself to the past by going backward because you have chosen to move forward.

Write out your plan to continue to walk in forgiveness even when thoughts of the offense come into your mind.

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8. You choose how to treat the person to reflect forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not mean that you continue to have a relationship with an unsafe person, nor does it mean that you continue to tolerate mistreatment. You can set boundaries to protect yourself while treating the person in a way that reflects you have forgiven.

Explain how you will treat the offender from now on, including what kind of relationship, if any, you are willing to have.

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When you experience a new consequence of the offense or are faced with something you have not processed, you may have to go through the forgiveness process again.

**The Forgiveness Letter**

Write a letter of forgiveness to a person who has wounded you. You can do one for each person you need to forgive or for each situation you have endured. Do one letter at a time. Write it even if you aren’t there in your heart to give you an idea of where you are trying to get to.

Dear _______________________,

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What to do with your letter:

- You can read your letter out loud to yourself in front of a mirror.
- You can read your letter to the person it is written to even if that person is deceased.
- You can give your letter to the person it is written to.
- You can read your letter to God and/or someone else.
- You can burn or shred your letter if that will help you to let go of what has happened and signify that your bitterness is over.
- You can keep your letter to remind you where your forgiveness process is going to end up.

Reading your letter aloud helps to solidify it in your mind and emotions. Sharing it with another person aids in your healing (James 5:16).
Jesus said, "I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

Each day, pray and ask God to give the following good things to the person you are having trouble forgiving. These are all things you desire for yourself. Pray with the same earnestness that you would if you were asking God to give you these things. If you are having trouble praying with sincerity, ask God to make you willing.

Day 1: Pray God blesses __________ with financial prosperity.
Day 2: Pray God blesses __________ with good health.
Day 3: Pray God blesses __________ with a good job.
Day 4: Pray God blesses __________ with good family relationships.
Day 5: Pray God blesses __________ with joy.
Day 6: Pray God blesses __________ with peace.
Day 7: Pray God blesses __________ with a good reputation and favor.
Day 8: Pray God blesses __________ with a long life.
Day 9: Pray God blesses __________ with happiness.
Day 10: Pray God blesses __________ with emotional stability and a sound mind.
Day 11: Pray God blesses __________ with a psychological and emotional healing.
Day 12: Pray God blesses __________ with good self-esteem and confidence.
Day 13: Pray God blesses ___________ with emotional support.

Day 14: Pray God blesses ___________ with good friends and companionship.

Day 15: Pray God blesses ___________ with salvation.

Day 16: Pray God blesses ___________ with comfort.

Day 17: Pray God blesses ___________ with fun and enjoyment of life.

Day 18: Pray God blesses ___________ with talents.

Day 19: Pray God blesses ___________ with safety and protection.

Day 20: Pray God blesses ___________ with love and affection.

Day 21: Pray God blesses ___________ with grace and mercy.


Day 23: Pray God blesses ___________ with contentment.

Day 24: Pray God blesses ___________ with wisdom and discernment.

Day 25: Pray God blesses ___________ with faith, belief, and trust.

Day 26: Pray God blesses ___________ with knowledge.

Day 27: Pray God blesses ___________ with spiritual maturity and a close relationship with God.

Day 28: Pray God blesses ___________ by fulfilling his/her heart's desires.

Day 29: Pray God blesses ___________ with physical stamina.

Day 30: Pray God blesses ___________ with forgiveness and release from guilt.

At the end of the thirty days, God will have done a work in your heart. I would love to hear about it!
Week 5: Moving Forward with Your Wounds

David noticed that his servants were whispering among themselves and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked. "Yes," they replied, "he is dead."

Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

2 Samuel 12:19-20 (NIV)

Taking Responsibility

When dealing with self-forgiveness, it is important to only take responsibility for what is yours. It isn’t unusual for the people who have been affected by dysfunction to take on responsibility that isn’t theirs. Children often tell themselves that it is their fault things aren’t right in their families because it helps them feel like they have control over the situation. That is less frightening then admitting that their parents don’t love them or care for them as they should.

When people blame us for their stuff, we often take it on. Over time, we begin to question ourselves and buy into the lie that we cause them to make the choices they do. When you are working on self-forgiveness, it is helpful to analyze the things you feel responsible for or guilty about and see if they really are yours.

List the things you feel you have done wrong in the situation/relationship that you are looking at.
Now go back and look at each one. Was it all your fault or just partially yours? Was it someone else’s? People have choices. Remember, we don’t make them feel or do anything. They still have the responsibility to choose how to respond to what we do or say.

Write by each one whether it was all, part or none of your responsibility.

Forgiving Yourself

Forgiveness of those who injure us is often difficult, especially with those things that have lasting ramifications. But there is something that is often even harder and that is forgiving yourself.

You deserve forgiveness even though you don’t think you do. God has forgiven you, so what logic would tell you that you aren’t worthy of your own forgiveness? To say the opposite would be saying that you need more than Jesus’ sacrifice for those things—and you don’t.

Here are some of the things you can say to yourself to be self-compassionate:

- I truly did the best I could at the time. If I had known better and been able to do it differently, I wouldn’t have done it that way.
- My intentions were honorable. I did what I thought God wanted me to do.
- I am forgiven by God and Jesus’ sacrifice covers all my bad choices.
- I can’t do anything about the past, but I am choosing to do things differently today.
- I wouldn’t condemn my friend if he/she told me the same thing. I would offer compassion and grace, so I will generously offer the same to myself.
- I don’t have to beat myself up for this. I am choosing to forgive myself.
- I cannot change the past, but if I have the chance, I will make amends to anyone I have harmed.
- I will offer myself love and unconditional acceptance because I am committed to treating myself kindly.

Circle the phrases that will help you to forgive yourself. Write them somewhere you will see them. Retrain yourself to say these in place of self-talk that keeps you stuck in unforgiveness toward yourself.
The Forgiveness Letter to Yourself

Write a letter of forgiveness to yourself. Offer yourself the same compassion you’d offer a friend who had done the same thing you did. Also offer yourself grace by understanding why you did it.

Dear ________________________,

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What to do with your letter:

- Read it aloud to yourself in front of the mirror.
- Share it with another person.
- Shred it or burn it if that will help you put the past behind you.

**To Confront or Not Confront Your Offender**

Once we are aware of our wounds and the damage they have caused, it is natural to want to confront the offender. It can be healing and freeing to use our voice to speak up about what happened and how we were and are affected. But it can also cause more wounding and pain if it goes badly.

How will you be affected by seeing this person? ______________________________________
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What do you hope will happen when you confront? ______________________________________
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Is that expectation reasonable? ____________________________________________________
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Is this person willing to admit what was done to you?________________________________
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If the person doesn’t admit it, how will it affect you? _________________________________
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Will it disrupt your life in any way to do this?______________________________________
Are there other people to consider? _________________________________________________

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Are you ready or do you need to wait? _____________________________________________

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How will you do it? ________________________________________________________________

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**Benefits of Experiencing Pain**

We don’t like that we have been wounded. It was painful to endure, and it is painful to work through the healing process. But if we are honest and open-minded, we will be able to see that it is now a part of who we are and that it has been used for good and for God’s glory.

Here are some benefits from our wounds:

- We appreciate what we have now.
- We have empathy and compassion for others going through similar difficulties.
- We know what not to do to others.
- We are strong survivors.
- We learned valuable lessons we can share with others.
• We have insight into ourselves.
• We are examples of people who have been healed.
• We learned to rely on God.
• We are a living example of people who have turned something bad into something good.
• We learned to be creative.
• We learned to rely on others for help.
• We had some good times. It wasn’t all bad.
• We had our children in the marriage.
• We met some incredible people.
• God is using it for His glory, our good, and others’ good.

Think about your wounds. What have you learned from them and what has made you as good as you are?

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Acceptance

The last stage of grief described by Elisabeth Kübler Ross is acceptance.

Acceptance is a powerful yet overlooked and misunderstood concept. When we aren’t accepting people, places, and things as they are, we are actively fighting them at some level. The fight exhausts us and takes our physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual energy. There is an internal struggle and restlessness that goes something like this: “I don’t like it. I don’t want it. I want something different. Why does it have to be this way?” Non-acceptance or a refusal to accept what has happened to you is literally holding out your hand and pushing it away. That doesn’t change anything. It is still true. You are just expending energy to refuse to accept it.

Acceptance is the opposite. It is literally holding out your hand and allowing it to be put in your hand and then closing your hand and drawing it to your chest as yours. It is giving up the hope that it could have been different. Once you accept the things you cannot change, you can then look at your personal choices. You can say, “It is what it is, now what?” And it is precisely that which you have control over.

Jesus struggled with acceptance. Let’s look at what that process looked like when He was struggling with His death on the cross.

Matthew 26:36-42

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not
fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggled intensely with relinquishing His will to the Father, knowing that His crucifixion wasn’t going to be easy. He was honest with God about His inner conflict, as we too should be as we work through our own internal battles on our way to acceptance.

How necessary is acceptance? Without acceptance, Jesus wouldn’t have been able to submit Himself to the suffering ahead. He needed to be aligned emotionally, spiritually, relationally, physically, and mentally with God’s will. And without acceptance, we will stay stuck in the pain of our wounds.

Write on your prior refusal to accept the wounds you have received and your willingness to accept them now.

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Moving Forward

Watch this video to explain this powerful concept of moving forward with an unexpected death which has helped some people to get a new perspective:

https://www.ted.com/talks/nora_mcinerny_we_don_t_move_on_from_grief_we_move_forward_with_it?utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_content=talk&utm_term=humanities

As explained in the video, we don’t get closure on something that is still a part of who we are. If God were to remove that part of our lives, including the memories, we wouldn’t be who we are today.

Instead, we are choosing to move forward with our lives by healing the wounds and embracing fully all that has happened to us.

Writing Your New Story

Your experiences become a part of your life story. The meaning that you give to the things that happen to you shapes your identity. You choose how to view your wounds. You can make them a powerful force for good or allow them to keep you stuck in the negativity and pain. You can embrace God’s plans for you that include what you have experienced. You can use the compassion and understanding and the things you have learned to give your life purpose.

Once you have grieved your wounds and walked through the forgiveness process, you have choices available to you that you didn’t have before.

Write your new story that includes what has happened to you and the way you now view your wounds.
Now read your letter to someone else.

**Continuing to Heal**

What is your plan to continue to work on healing the wounds of your past?
Recommended Resources

**Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families**

*The Truth in the Mirror: A Guide to Healthy Self-Image, Karla Downing*

*The Intimacy Struggle: Revised and Expanded for All Adults by Janet Woititz*

*Loving an Adult Child of an Alcoholic by Douglas Bey*

*Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families, Linda and John Friel*

*Adult Child’s Guide to What’s Normal, Linda and John Friel*

*Bad Childhood, Good Life, Dr. Laura Schlessinger*

*Healing Your Emotional Self: A Powerful Program to Help You Raise Your Self-Esteem, Quiet Your Inner Critic, and Overcome Your Shame, Beverly Engel, LMFT*

*It Wasn’t Your Fault: Freeing Yourself from the Shame of Childhood Abuse with the Power of Self-Compassion, Beverly Engel, LMFT*

*Healing the Child Within: Discovery and Recovery for Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families, Charles Whitfield*

*Healing the Shame that Binds You, John Bradshaw*

**Dealing with Parents/In-laws**

*Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life, Susan Forward, Ph.D.*

*Toxic In-laws: Loving Strategies for Protecting Your Marriage, Susan Forward, Ph.D*

*Honoring Dishonorable Parents, Jan Frank*

*When Love Hurts: 10 Principles to Transform Difficult Relationships, Karla Downing*

**Abuse**

*Victory Over Verbal Abuse: A Healing Guide to Renewing Your Spirit and Reclaiming Your Life, Patricia Evans*

*The Verbally Abusive Relationship, Patricia Evans*
**Grief**

*Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations For Working Through Grief Paperback*, Martha Whitmore Hickman


**Sexual Abuse/Sexual Addiction**

*Shattered Vows: Hope and Healing for Women Who Have Been Sexually Betrayed*, Debra Laaser

*Faithful & True: Sexual Integrity in a Fallen World*, Mark Laaser (for sex-addicts)

*Intimate Deception: Healing the Wounds of Sexual Betrayal*, Dr. Sheri Keffer

*Door of Hope*, Jan Frank (child abuse)

*Torn Asunder: Healing from Extramarital Affairs*, Dave Carder (workbook available too)

**Homosexuality**

*When Homosexuality Hits Home*, Joe Dallas

**Spiritual Meaning of Loss**

*Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Path to Joy*, Larry Crabb

**Forgiveness**

*Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve*, by Lewis B Smedes
Support Groups

**Divorce Care**
Check DivorceCare.org for local groups

**Grief Share**
Check GriefShare.org for local groups

**Twelve Step Recovery**
Alanon Family Groups (families/friends of alcoholics)
www.alanon.com

Alcoholics Anonymous (alcoholics)
www.aa.org

Codependents Anonymous
www.codependents.org

Codependents of Sex Addicts
www.cosa-recovery.org

Gam-Anon (gamblers)
www.gam-anon.org

Nar-Anon Family Groups (families/friends of drug addicts)
www.nar-anon.org

Celebrate Recovery is a Christian 12 Step recovery group. Check local churches if your church doesn’t have it. www.celebraterecovery.com


**Mental Illness**
The National Alliance for Mental Illness (Nami.org) has information, classes, and support groups. Lists of local groups are listed by county.

Namioc.org is the group for Orange County, California.
Evaluation of “Healing the Wounds of Your Past”

What did you like about this class?

What did you dislike about this class?

What would you suggest would improve this class?

How valuable did you find the following exercises? Rate them with 1 being not helpful to 5 being extremely helpful.

- Writing the letter to your inner child.  1  2  3  4  5
- Writing the letter to your adult from your inner child.  1  2  3  4  5
- Learning about defenses and shame.  1  2  3  4  5
- Going through the grief exercise.  1  2  3  4  5
- Working through the process of forgiveness.  1  2  3  4  5
- Writing the letters of forgiveness to a person and yourself.  1  2  3  4  5
- Working through the process of acceptance.  1  2  3  4  5
- Writing your new story.  1  2  3  4  5
- Sharing with other class participants.  1  2  3  4  5

Would you recommend this class to others? Yes/No and Why? __________________________
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How has this class helped you let go of the wounds of your past?

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Name (optional):______________________________________