



Foreword

I can't think of a better time for *Body & Soul, Healed & Whole* to come into your hands. I'm excited for you to read it and begin the work of healing.

When I was growing up in the church, we never had conversations about our physical body, other than that it was the temple of the Holy Spirit (whatever that meant). I do remember our youth group leader warning the girls that our maturing bodies could cause boys and men to “stumble.” The message was clear: “Girls, cover your body from neck to knees, lest you cause your brother to sin.” Being told I was responsible for someone else's thoughts and behaviors made emerging into womanhood feel daunting. Too many women, myself included, have experienced another person using, misusing, and abusing our bodies for sinful, selfish reasons. Sadly, Christian women often carry the physical, emotional, spiritual, sexual, and psychological fallout of blame, guilt, and shame from someone else's sin against them.

As a Christian counselor and coach, I've journeyed with countless women who have never healed from their sexual trauma. They've sat for years in the rubble of silence and shame, never telling another human being what happened. Recently a woman shared with me that she had been sexually abused while dating. She was well into middle age but, until now, had stayed quiet. Why? She said she felt

responsible, even though she was asleep when he violated her. She swallowed the lie that she was damaged goods and God was disappointed in her. She believed God wanted her to marry her abuser. What kind of God is that? The harm inflicted wasn't just sexual, physical, or emotional. It was spiritual.

Healing from that harm is a process and takes time. How do we begin to change the way we see and relate to our own body? Our self? Our God? Or even our abuser? How do we learn to banish the self-hatred we've felt and lived with and learn to feel compassion toward the parts of us that have been misused, broken, and damaged by others? How do we bring that kindness and compassion to the part of ourselves that contributed to our own harm in our awkward attempts to soothe or comfort our pain?

How do we begin to feel our feelings when our practice has been to stuff them down and shut them out? How do we dial down the intensity of our emotions when they get too strong or out of control, scaring ourselves or others? How do we heal what feels eternally broken? We wonder, *Will I ever feel sexually whole again? Are sexual feelings okay for a good Christian woman to feel? To express? To enjoy?* And what do we do with those sexual feelings when there is no safe or biblically sanctioned partner (i.e., husband) to express them with?

Today most women can find information about their bodies, sexual abuse, trauma, and what's normal and not. But information alone does not bring wisdom, healing, or growth. We also need to be safely welcomed into healthy conversations with God, ourselves, and other women so we can better understand how our bodies impact our sense of self and our relationships.

Tabitha's book is a rare gift for those who have experienced sexual trauma. Much like a lullaby, Tabi's words will soothe your hyper-sensitive nervous system as she sings over you with biblically and psychologically sound wisdom. She gently sprinkles truth with compassionate practices that will help you take that long journey from head to heart and from body to soul. There's no rush. Take your time as you savor each chapter. Do the exercises again and again if you

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need to. Linger as long as you like. Stop when it becomes too much and rest. Stopping and resting are part of your healing and intentional care for yourself. Each step forward creates a sturdy base, providing a sense of safety and trust in yourself that will help you heal and bring you into alignment with the woman God designed you to be.

I know Tabitha. She has the heart of a teddy bear and the soul of a warrior. She is gentle and she is fierce. You can trust her to walk this journey of healing and wholeness with you.

Leslie Vernick, MSW
relationship coach, speaker, author of
The Emotionally Destructive Relationship
and The Emotionally Destructive Marriage

Author's Note

Please note that this book is direct, and I don't mince words. We're going to talk about all the hard things here, so parts of it may feel brutal or heavy. If you find that to be true for you, I encourage you to consider partnering with a licensed therapist who can help you process your experiences. I believe the information and exercises here will assist you in your healing journey, but this book doesn't replace counseling or other mental health care.

Please take care of yourself as you read. I tell all my clients, clinicians, and students the same thing: You are the only you that you have. You are created in the image and likeness of God Himself, and you deserve good care. Please pay attention to your body; it tells you so much. And as you're reading, if the experience becomes overwhelming, step away. Take a walk, read another book, listen to a lighthearted podcast, watch a funny movie, play with your kids, or get a hug from someone you trust.

All the stories in this book are compilations from my counseling clients and from women I've met while speaking or teaching in women's ministry. Names have been changed, and I've been careful to be sure there are no identifying details. Situations like these are so common in abusive relationships that you may see aspects of yourself in these pages. My hope is that they bring healing to your soul.

If you are in a dangerous situation

Please consider reaching out for help. You can contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline (thehotline.org) as a starting point. If you need an advocate, you can contact your local domestic violence shelter or reach out to a ministry like Called to Peace (calledtopeace.org). If you are in immediate danger, call 911 or go to the nearest police station for help. If you are struggling with suicidal thoughts, please reach out to the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. Someone is there to support you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Take care of you. The information will be here when you're ready.
Grace upon grace upon grace to you as we journey together.

INTRODUCTION

MY INVITATION TO YOU

Sex has the power to touch the deepest dimension of what it means to be human and alive to God; therefore, it stands to reason that it is hated more than any other dimension of humanity by a kingdom that opposes the glory of God.

DAN ALLENDER, *Healing the Wounded Heart*

While driving around town one day in 2008, I noticed a blinking light on my dash, warning me that I needed to fill up my tank or I'd soon be pushing my SUV rather than driving it. I made a quick right-hand turn into a familiar gas station. I stepped out by the pump under a clear sky that was a brilliant Carolina blue. I was enjoying the gentle breeze that carried little humidity—a rarity in the Southern summer—when I noticed a fellow next to me who was filling up his Jeep. He smiled at me as I pumped gas. I smiled back. We made small talk as we filled our vehicles. This was nothing strange for me. Those who know me would tell you that I can basically talk to a brick wall. I will talk to nearly anyone because I really like people. This guy seemed nice, and he was handsome with a good sense of humor. After our tanks were full, he and I stood and chatted for a few more minutes. Then he asked for my phone number. I felt my pulse quicken and my palms begin to sweat. I panicked. I agreed but gave

him a fake number. I felt suddenly disoriented, though I'd been to this gas station many times. We got in our vehicles and drove away.

I felt nauseated and even forgot where I was headed. I pulled into a neighborhood nearby and parked, my whole body trembling, sweat pouring off me. What was happening? I had enjoyed the conversation; what was the harm in giving this man my phone number? Images flashed through my mind of my ex-husband's treatment of me. My body shook harder as I was flooded with horrific memories. I sat in my SUV until the flashback passed.

As my body and mind settled, I cried. I felt hated, broken, used, and destroyed. No way could I think about having another relationship. Ever.

I'd love to say I have only intellectual knowledge of the impact of sexual abuse and assault, but sadly my knowledge is experiential and runs deep. I was sexually abused as a child and sexually assaulted repeatedly in my abusive marriage. My sexuality was utterly shattered so early in life I didn't even know at the time that something had been stolen by the kingdom of darkness. By the time I understood the implications of what happened to me, I was left standing in what felt like a barren wasteland full of toppling buildings and burned-out ruins, like some dystopian novel. Except this was my very real life.

The confusion and brokenness I felt is common among women. Our stories may not be exactly alike. Maybe your innocence also was stripped away in childhood. Maybe you were sexually assaulted as a young college student while living away from home for the first time. Even if you were harmed in an abusive marriage, where you were never permitted to say no and your needs and desires were never considered, the circumstances and aftermath may have been quite different from mine. No matter how your sense of sexuality and sense of self were shattered, it created deep wounding and confusion. You wonder if you were damaged beyond repair. You wonder whether God can even love you. You wonder whether or not you even want God to love you; after all, where was He when it was happening?

You want to know if it can ever be healed or different. I wondered all that too.

Before we really dive in, I want you to know that I feel the weight of this topic. Like many women who have been sexually abused, I spent years grappling with the fallout—everything from shame and sorrow to a distorted view of my sexuality. But it wasn't until I finally escaped my controlling, coercive, abusive marriage that I was determined to find healing and wholeness. My healing journey wasn't quick and easy—my experiences had left me shattered, both physically and emotionally. It has taken me a long time to work through my own story. In fact, I continue to do this repair work. Though the journey can be tough and is often not linear or nearly as fast as we'd like, I want to promise you it is possible to heal. It's a lot like climbing a mountain with rock scrambles and switchbacks amid the fog and rain. Some moments you hurt all over, your knees are scraped up from slipping and falling on hidden roots and rocks, and you wonder why you can no longer see the trail. But when you finally hit the summit and look out over the epic views, you realize that the journey was worth it.

This isn't an easy topic for me, even though I now regularly talk with women about sex and sexuality as a certified sex addiction therapist (CSAT) and trauma-specialized therapist.¹ Not only have I experienced the helplessness and hopelessness as an abuse survivor, but I've also sat across from hundreds of hurting people and felt the heaviness of their stories. These women often bring questions with no easy answers, and despite the alphabet soup of letters after my name, I don't claim to be an expert who has everything figured out. I'm a fellow journeyer, and I hope you'll give me grace as I travel this road with you.

You may be reading this as you're just beginning to think about the harm that's been done to you, or you may be further along in this process. Wherever you are, I invite you to care for yourself. Together, we will examine the damage done by abuse and assault, step onto a pathway to healing, and address a whole bunch of questions that

many women are too afraid to ask. Along the way, you'll discover that sexuality does not have to be a minefield or permanently broken.

Much has been written about sex in both secular and religious spaces, but I have yet to see many specialists really look at how sexuality is shattered after abuse, especially domestic abuse and coercive control. There is a particular lack of resources for women who are single. More importantly, women need to know how to put those pieces back together. Even if the abuse ends, our sexuality doesn't suddenly reemerge intact. Our vision of healthy sex has been distorted.

The women I talk with often end up in one of two places—either shutting down their sexuality altogether or engaging in sexual behaviors that don't match their values. They may even alternate between those two responses or slide back and forth on the continuum.

Some women vow to never touch a man again and become celibate, though they may have a deep longing to find a true partner and companion. Others decide the way they'd been taught to "be pure" must have been wrong, and they're going to sleep with or do whatever with whomever they want, married or otherwise. They say, "I played by the rules, and I was played by the rules. Now I'm going to do what I want." They lament that they did the "right" things—waited for their first kiss at the altar or for sex on their wedding night—and then found themselves in the torture of an abusive marriage with no hope of escape. They cry, "No more," in their attempt to make sense of the harm they endured.

Maybe you can relate to the woman who has begun using pornography because it was forced on her in her marriage and she now feels she needs it for sexual arousal. Or perhaps you understand the single woman who turns to masturbation for comfort or who is frightened by her sexual urges. Or maybe you understand another woman's fixation on erotic fiction because that's the only sexual outlet that feels safe to her. Possibly you relate to the woman who has pushed down her longings so far that she insists she feels no sexual desire whatsoever. Women in each of these situations have questions—but where and with whom can they even broach them?

These pages are a safe place to bring these questions. As we begin, let's take a look at the road map we'll follow in the coming chapters.

FINDING THE FOOTPATH

Sexual abuse and assault can be scary subjects. Sometimes the signs are unmistakable, but many victims wonder whether their experience qualifies because they've been told over and over that it's all in their heads or that they just need to be more submissive or it "wasn't that bad." We start the first chapter, then, with a frank discussion of what constitutes abuse and assault, as well as coercive control. What are the signs, and how do they affect us?

When we've been harmed, we may be tempted to seek safety in solitude. But as we'll discover, God created us to need healthy relationships—with Him, with ourselves, and with others. And that includes people of the opposite sex. In chapters 2 and 3, we'll explore how to build these relationships as we heal our sexual selves. We'll learn about important boundaries, safety, and self-care, and how we can incorporate them into our relationships.

Another key to a healthy relationship with ourselves is to acknowledge that we live in bodies and that our faith is never separated from them. When our bodies have been violated through abuse, our faith and our connection to our bodies both take a massive hit. In chapter 4, we'll learn to reconnect to the very good bodies God gave us. As we do, we will shore up our faith too.

We've all heard, at some point, the research that says babies who get no touch fail to thrive. Did you know that, as adults, we need touch just as much? Did you know that loneliness is actually physically deadly? Touch is vital, so giving and receiving healthy, nonsexual touch is critical. During this stop on our journey in chapters 5 and 6, we will explain that type of touch and consider ways to begin incorporating it into our daily life.

What turns you on? Do you know? Do you know how your preferences were formed? Our next two chapters, 7 and 8, explore this

important topic. Arousal structures are key to understanding our bodies and our healing, so we'll look at what they are, how they're formed and distorted by abuse, and how to begin reframing them when needed to help us heal our sexual selves.

When we've been abused, we often find ourselves agreeing with things the abuser said to or over us—and then we live out those beliefs, which we assume we created ourselves. Worse yet, we often think they reflect the way God sees us. Growing up, we may have been told (or even said), “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” only to realize that they sure do hurt. (In fact, emotional pain causes the same areas of the brain to light up as physical pain, so those words that feel like a gut punch are basically a gut punch.) Chapter 9 will help us break the vows (lies we've come to believe about our identity) because of curses spoken over us (the stuff our abusers said about who we are) and explore what God actually says about us.

Once we have addressed some of those complicated topics, we will engage in a discussion of healthy sex in chapter 10. You may be thinking, *Wow, it will take us a long time to get to the point!* I appreciate that. We have to lay the foundation for our complete sexuality, which is far more than just sex itself. If we jump into this topic too soon, we may be left lacking and hurting. Chapter 10 will apply to all of us, whether we're married or single. We don't have to have a partner to be healthy sexual beings.

Assault and abuse can affect not only our thought processes, but also our sexual behavior and preferences. My clients often bring their toughest questions to therapy. These are the ones they're too afraid to walk up to their women's ministry leader and ask—but they need answers. Chapter 11 poses the hard questions—the ones that often hold the most shame—and provides answers.

Finally, we'll bring it all home in the final chapter by shining a light on the path ahead of us. Though we will reach the end of our journey together here, we will now have the tools we need to continue to heal and move forward.

MY INVITATION TO YOU

I want to be very clear about something. While faith guides my steps, I am well aware that Scripture has been a weapon used by many abusers. I am not a take-two-verses-and-call-me-in-the-morning girlie. I have no patience for trite use of Scripture that is used to spiritually bypass the destruction of abuse. Because you can't hear my voice or see my face as you read these words, I want to unequivocally say I get madder than a hornet when God's Word is misused to silence victims and prevent justice. Anywhere I use Scripture or talk about God, I've tried to be especially careful and consider how it could be heard. Please know, above all else, your pain is real, it matters, and you never should have been harmed.

Engaging with this book takes enormous courage, and I applaud you for that. As I mentioned earlier, I know these are weighty topics with multiple layers that affect people differently. For that reason, I invite you to work through these chapters at your own pace. Also, to give you opportunities to pause, rest, and reflect along the way, I've included Mindful Moments journaling prompts and self-care practices to help you do exactly that.

And if you come across some exercises that you think are cheesy, I encourage you to give them a whirl anyway. Some may be simple, but they're not easy. Your brain and body have done a great job of protecting you—often through avoidance, dissociation, and busyness. Doing something new can feel really weird and uncomfortable. I can't even tell you how often I've said during my own therapy, "I don't like how this feels!" the first few times I've tried something. Those practices are now the ones my clients and I have grown to love and embrace.

You will also notice sidebars in some chapters. Many of these take a closer look at the vocabulary we use around sex. I know it can be tempting to read right around sidebars in books, but I encourage you not to do that. Words often hold more power than we realize. What we say and how we speak to ourselves and other people matter. Words are often used as weapons against survivors, and it's time to destigmatize and desexualize terms that hold much more meaning than we may realize.

BODY & SOUL, HEALED & WHOLE

As we expand our vocabulary and talk about restoring healthy sexuality, noticing what we feel and where those feelings are in our bodies can help us process harm and embrace difficult sensations and thoughts. As you begin this work, it may even be helpful to see where you can incorporate some of these words into your overall context of life.

All of these additional helps—journaling, body practices, and even vocabulary expansion—are designed to help all of you—body, mind, and spirit—participate in the healing process. Think of these self-care skills as taking time to sit beside still waters, restoring your soul. We will do so much heavy lifting together that I encourage you to find the rest stops you need along the way.

You've got this. You are worth healing. You are worth wholeness.

ASSAULT ON THE SOUL

Recognizing the Signs That Something Isn't Right

Whether we realize it or not, it is our woundedness, or how we cope with it, that dictates much of our behavior, shapes our social habits, and informs our ways of thinking about the world.

GABOR MATÉ, *The Myth of Normal*

Natalie sat across from me on the couch in my office, her eyes puffy and tears streaming down her face. Sunlight poured in from the window, casting a warm light in the room. The room didn't feel bright in that moment though. The room felt heavy. Though unseen, a thick darkness seemed to swirl around us, despite the sunlight.

I listened intently as Natalie told me about a "bad sexual experience" she'd had with her husband earlier in the week.

"I'd been looking forward to sitting down to dinner with Bill and the kids, but my heart sank as soon as he walked in the door after work," she said, knotting the tissue in her hand. "He didn't even bother to say hello. He just gave me a weird smirk and said, 'I had a hard day at work today, so you'd better be ready for me later, baby.'"

"The thing is, I had a migraine that morning after being up with our four-month-old most of the night. During the day I made sure

the laundry was done and the house was vacuumed. I was looking forward to finally having a quiet night after the kids went to bed so I could try to get rid of the pounding in my head.

“Bill made it abundantly clear that was not going to happen. He kept after me as I got the table set for dinner. I told him no; I wasn’t feeling well. I told him the baby had been up all night. I asked if we could just rest that evening. I offered to cuddle with him. None of that mattered.

“When the oven timer went off, I turned to head into the kitchen, but he yanked me back by my arm. He told me it was my duty as his wife. I got a brief break during dinner with the kids, but he was right back at it while I was loading the dishwasher. I found myself begging him to please let me rest, to wait till the next day when I would feel better. He told me I’d been resting all day as a stay-at-home mom. When I tried again to tell him all I did during the day—caring for the kids, getting all the chores done, and making sure dinner was ready when he walked in—he yelled at me.” Natalie used her tissue to dab at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

“Late that night, after the kids went to bed, Bill and I watched TV. During a commercial, he told me that the Bible says he owns the rights to my body. I was to be ready for him whenever he asked. If I failed to do so, I was worthless as a wife. Then he asked me if I was sleeping with someone else! After hours of his ranting, I finally gave him what he wanted so I could go to sleep. My head was splitting, and I was barely able to see. I just needed to get some rest.”

“What did I do wrong?” she asked me, putting her head down in her hands. “I love Bill, so why did I feel so broken, used, and dirty afterward?”

When she looked up at me, I saw a mix of shame, fear, and a bit of hope. My heart was heavy, knowing the words I’d have to use.

I leaned forward and softly said, “You told him no. You were sick and had cared for the kids all day. He called you worthless and wouldn’t take no for an answer. He badgered you for hours. Then he accused you of having sex with some other man since you were telling

him no. And in the end, when you were too weary and too tired to fight anymore, he took what he wanted.”

I paused, noticing my own body’s heaviness, and took a deep breath. Then I said, “The word for what happened is *rape*.” I paused to let that register with her.

She looked at me with wide eyes and stammered, “N-No. No. It can’t be. I’m married. I gave my forever ‘yes’ at the altar. I don’t have any rights to my body. The Bible says so. I should have said yes. I sinned against him.” She put her head down again and began to sob.

Every day I listen to women like Natalie tell me the details about how they became sexually shattered.

And like her, they think they are responsible for the pain they’re in.

AFTERSHOCKS

So many women I’ve worked with have experienced echoes of Natalie’s story. Sexual abuse and assault are far more prevalent than many believe: One in five women is raped in her lifetime; one in three of those women experienced rape between the ages of eleven and seventeen. Half of female rape victims were assaulted by an intimate partner.¹ Some were abused as children by someone they should have been able to trust. Others were assaulted in high school or college (or childhood, high school, and college). Some were sexually abused in their marriage. At times, women are forced to watch and reenact pornography with their spouses. Some have been forced to share their beds with others—even animals. I’m so sorry to be so direct, but if this is part of your story, I want you to know it’s safe to bring that here.

Perhaps by now you recognize that someone did harm you in some way. You may be tempted, though, to minimize it or to “pull up those bootstraps” and just keep going. After all, what’s done is done, right? The truth, however, is that violence done to your body, mind, and spirit doesn’t simply evaporate. If not dealt with, it will remain lodged inside, a silent but unwelcome guest that leaves several distinct

calling cards. It may not be obvious that your body is reckoning with the harm, but it is.

Shame

Shame is prevalent in women who've been violated. In my therapy room, it also shows up in words that can barely be uttered and often come out in a whisper, while women sit with red faces, wet with tears, eyes cast down at the floor. What is healthy sex? What is a real, consented yes? For those grappling with sexuality after being sexually abused or assaulted (including being assaulted in marriage), it's so confusing and unclear.

Often women have been exposed to teaching in the church that says men simply cannot control their sexual urges. Wives must comply with their demands; otherwise, their husbands will use pornography. (Spoiler alert: Lots of men turn to porn even if their wives never say no. It's not about the women or even about sex—but that's a whole other book.)

Shame may also show up in our reaction to our body's sensations. Some women are lured into the web of pornography or erotic fiction themselves because they don't know what to do with what they feel in their bodies. In fact, women's use of pornography has skyrocketed in recent years. While it's hard to find good statistics around this, one Barna study reported that about 15 percent of Christian women admit to using pornography at least once a month.² As a practitioner, I'd say that statistic is likely low. Many women I work with struggle to admit to using pornography due to shame.

Grief

When bodies and souls have been abused, grief wells up. While it is uncomfortable, grief is also healing. It's often the first indicator someone has that what happened to them was not okay, and feeling sad is both natural and a signal that pain and loss need to be addressed.

When processing grief, it's vital that we orient ourselves kindly

LET'S HAVE A WORD

Sexuality

The language we use around sex matters. In our society, so many terms have been overly sexualized. When we hear many rich and beautiful words—think *sensuality*, *alluring*, and *intimacy*—we are likely to think of their sexual implications first. When we've been harmed, that leads to a lot of activation in the body. We may feel our hearts race, breathing increase, and muscles tighten. Because those are unpleasant sensations, we push them away. But what if some of these words have a fuller and broader context? What if, as we enter into embracing our sexuality, we were able to appreciate the vibrancy that our senses and relationships were designed to add to our lives? With that goal, I've sprinkled "Let's Have a Word" sidebars throughout the book, which are designed to help you reclaim the power of words that may have been cheapened or limited for you.

Let's start with the "big one." Perhaps when you hear the word *sexuality*, you think only of sexual activity. I'd like to push back on that for two reasons: First, it feels so narrow. Second, I don't think we should define words by their root (thank you, sixth grade English class, for instilling that fierce belief in my soul).

For our purposes, I define sexuality as the aspects of sexual expression, sexual interest, and sexual activity that God created in us. This definition is consistent with those used by certified sex addiction therapists (CSATs), who help clients return to healthy sexuality either because they battle addiction or compulsion or because they've been betrayed by someone who struggles in that arena.

How do we express our sexual selves? Is your heart racing right now because you can't even imagine *having* a sexual self? Or does the term alone totally freak you out? I hear you. Yet this might be a concept to consider. *We are sexual beings*. We were created this way. We'll talk more about being embodied and our embodied sexuality elsewhere, but for now just allow yourself to be open to the possibility that you have a sexual self.

What about your sexual interest? If you've been abused or otherwise violated, you may be thinking, *I have no sexual interest, thanks*. And that may be true now. Or maybe you're simply afraid to talk about it. I mean, where in the church can we go to have these conversations? You may not be in a congregation where you can walk up to the women's leadership team and say, "I'd like to have a frank discussion about sexual interest. Is there a time next Tuesday that would work for you? I'll bring coffee and donuts." But these conversations really do need to be had—and we will, throughout this book.

toward the little girl or woman who had so much stolen from her. We can bless all that little girl or woman experienced. And if you recoil at the thought of blessing these hard places, stick with me. We're going to talk more about this. I know this concept of blessing can be disorienting if you've never considered it. We are also going to talk more about grief as we journey together.

Isolation

Abusers often isolate us from healthy community. Actually, they often isolate victims from *any* community! They may insist that you celebrate holidays alone or prevent you from signing up for a neighborhood book club. But they don't always forbid you to interact with family and friends; some abusers are much more subtle. When you have a girls' night out planned, your husband may call a few minutes before he was supposed to be home to watch the kids to tell you he now has to work late. Or he might use looks or body language to warn you implicitly against going to avoid some sort of future punishment.

Sometimes abusers so thoroughly distort our self-perception that we believe no one would even want to be our friend. This isn't true at all, but that belief makes taking the risk of community incredibly hard. If our faith community was weaponized against us, finding good, godly community may be a terrifying thought. This is an example of an area where we can combat the lies we've been fed even if they *feel* so true.

Normalization

Our neural pathways are shaped by what we're exposed to. The more often something is presented to us, the more normal it becomes to us. This is called *habituation*, which means that something that was once novel or new becomes normal. This is why exposure to sexualized ads, pornography, and violence makes it seem more normal to our senses.

Our very own brain can convince us that something is normal as well. When we tell ourselves in the thick of an abusive situation that

everything is fine, okay, and normal, we may inadvertently habituate ourselves to harm. So many survivors have been told that their husbands have headship and the final say that they come to believe they must submit no matter the cost. These women may believe that this is just what a normal, godly marriage looks like—even though it's often nothing like what the Bible says marriage should be. Many evangelical women were raised in a purity culture that insisted they were wholly responsible for a man's lust issues. Again, that is a significant distortion. Because of normalization, however, by the time they wonder whether a particular behavior is proper or a certain viewpoint is true, they've been drinking poison for a long time.

If you're reading this and thinking, *Oh, no! This sounds way too familiar!*, don't fret. This is how it is for so many people, and we can only know what we know when we know. In some ways our brains normalizing things is how we survive the awfulness of it all. And now that you know, you can make shifts toward a healthier and healed place. As I've said a few times and will say again: Once a woman is free from abuse, her sexuality doesn't somehow suddenly emerge or reemerge intact. Her vision of what is healthy has been distorted and needs healing.

PAINFULLY SKEWED

I had a really good meal in Arkansas recently, and it was a sign of healing. Let me explain.

I was thoroughly traumatized when I landed in Arkansas on a warm, spring day. The weather was perfect: not too hot or cold or humid. The landscape was lush and green with all the newness of spring. But a storm was raging inside me that made everything feel topsy-turvy. Though I had been free from my abuser for more than a decade, the aftermath of the abuse in our family was still playing out. I've mentioned this and will continue to mention it—the body keeps the score.³ And that's true for our kids too.

So after I had lived in North Carolina for thirty-four years, life

as I knew it ended. In thirty days I'd sold everything we owned—our house, its contents, literally anything with value—and moved to Arkansas to get my son needed medical care. Though I realize Arkansas is not the place people think of as a medical bastion, what we needed was not offered in North Carolina but weirdly was available in Arkansas. Since I'm a mama who would do anything to help her kiddo, we relocated. And any mama with a kiddo who is in a life-and-death struggle knows the toll that takes on your own soul.

As we settled into an apartment just off the Arkansas River, I tried to get my soul to settle in. There was no settling. I deeply grieved all I had lost but was hopeful that this move could lead to something good. Yet in the days that followed, Arkansas did not seem kind to me. The people were nice enough. Our medical providers were helpful and skilled. But I couldn't see *goodness*. I could see only *struggle*. I couldn't even find a good meal. A round of early-days COVID had sabotaged my taste and smell. When they finally returned, I could not seem to find a decent restaurant anywhere, and I was often too tired to cook. Back then, my son and I agreed that the best restaurant in Arkansas was our kitchen.

Despite my hopelessness, something was happening. It just goes to show what I've learned over the years: Jesus is sneaky. To be clear, He knows what He's doing; I just don't know what He's up to. That's why, when I see His hand move, I often refer to Him as “sneaky Jesus.”

Looking back now, what I thought was meant to be a brief pit stop actually became a major hub for my personal healing. By the time my son's medical treatment had finished and we prepared to move to Texas, I had begun connecting with community. Because I now spend time at both our Texas and North Carolina counseling offices, God has ordered my life to include trips back to or through Arkansas frequently. To avoid having to drive through Atlanta traffic, I take what I call the “northern route” between Texas and North Carolina—and that takes me right through Arkansas every time.

As the years have progressed, God has given me a beautiful and

kind community in Arkansas, and I'm grateful to be able to spend time with them often. This hit me one night while I was out with friends at a restaurant and realized that I was savoring an excellent meal. I was also enjoying the space and presence of people I love. And it was good. Arkansas was no longer a dark place full of turmoil and fear—it was a place of precious relationships—and also some good meals. Though I remain an excellent cook, I can officially say that if I ever moved back to Arkansas, my kitchen would not be the only good place to eat.

But what had changed?

The only thing different was my healing. I was able to see and experience *goodness* where I had seen only *darkness* before.

EXPLORING THE DICHOTOMY

When we've experienced sexual harm, it really messes up our whole sexual system. We don't know what we believe. Like I felt in Arkansas at first, we see nothing good at all. We sense only a wasteland in our souls, like something out of the movie *The Terminator* where once-beautiful cities and landscapes are ash heaps. But just as Arkansas has become a beloved rest spot for me, so beauty can follow and rise from the ashes.

Now I sat quietly, watching Natalie's shoulders shake as she sobbed, and I felt my own heart ache as she wrestled with my words. I held tender space with her in the final moments of our time that week as she began to realize that what she had been *told* was healthy sex was anything *but* healthy. Gently and carefully I went to one of the Scriptures I knew she was referring to—a passage that is utterly distorted by abusers—and explored it with her. As we closed the session, I saw deep pain etched in her face. She looked so small sitting on my couch.

Perhaps like Natalie you've just been confronted with the truth that what happened to you is not okay, that you are not at fault. Maybe you sense that your sexuality has been utterly destroyed by the

mistreatment you've endured. It may need a complete revamp and healing. The road ahead may look rocky and steep, which is why I want to jump ahead in Natalie's story to tell you that she did survive and grow. She worked to set boundaries and listen to what her body, mind, and spirit needed. She challenged negative internal beliefs and paid attention to what delighted her. Perhaps most important, she evaluated her relationship and determined it was no longer safe to remain in it after her abuser steadfastly refused to change. She moved forward and found a healthy and supportive community.

That, in fact, is where the pathway to healing begins—by looking inside and outside ourselves to find support.



ROOTING IN

When teaching on domestic abuse and coercive control, I have the amazing privilege of facilitating grounding breaks when we're teaching hard topics, like sexual abuse and assault. And that's really the topic of this whole book. This is one of my favorite exercises to do with the students. It helps remind us of our strength as we root in to a God who deeply loves us and weeps with us. It also helps us release the energy in our bodies generated by hard and painful experiences.

This exercise uses the creativity of our God-given imaginations to bring truth to our minds and bodies. It is based on the imagery in Jeremiah 17:8: "They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit" (NLT).

Sit or stand with your feet flat on the floor or lie on a comfortable surface on your back and bend your knees so your feet are flat on the surface of the bed or floor. If you don't have use of your feet, you can press your hands against a sturdy surface, like a table or wall.

Imagine you are a sturdy, steady oak tree planted by a river, and your roots reach deep into the ground to access nourishing water. Take some moments to visualize this. Imagine feeling immovable and safe no matter what comes your way.

Press your feet or hands into the floor or surface, noticing the resistance of the floor or surface. Picture roots pressing in deep and reaching the river. Notice the steadiness of your feet or hands. You may imagine sunny days with warmth cascading over you, as you remain deeply rooted as the river rolls quietly by. Spend some time just noticing how this makes you feel.

Next, you may imagine a stormy day with wind whipping you this way and that, the river rushing and roiling around you while your roots keep you steady and strong. Allow yourself to be mindful of any feelings that rise up in your body, but focus on the strong, steady feeling of being securely rooted.

Finally, you might imagine yourself in a drought, dry air pressing in around you. Now visualize your roots going in so deep that they reach the

sustenance of the water, even if the water level is lower than normal. If you feel distress during this exercise, allow the feelings to arise but remain focused on the roots still holding you steady. Press into the surface a bit harder if needed.

End the visualization by imagining yourself back in the calm warmth, without drought or storm, rooted deep next to the river. Remember that while seasons shift and change, your rootedness does not.

SCANNING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

So many survivors struggle with hypervigilance—that state of always being watchful, waiting for the next thing. Many of the women I work with tell me, “I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop, even when—maybe especially when—things are good.” Brené Brown calls this “foreboding joy.”⁴ We fear that anything good we have will be taken away. Survivors are acutely aware of this because pleasant interactions with our abusers often turn into nightmares even before we’ve had the chance to experience the good.

This exercise helps you take the ordinary and consider it differently. Learning to see things with a new perspective can help ease you into more peace.

Get into a comfortable position. Scan your surroundings with a curious attitude. What catches your eye? Take a moment to focus on it. What sensations are you aware of in your body as you consider what you are seeing? Is the sensation pleasant or unpleasant? Without judgment, just notice and be curious. Is there something new about what you’re noticing? Something you have never seen before?

If the feelings that came up were unpleasant, is there a way to behold the object in a more positive light? For example, if you notice unwashed plates and silverware in the sink, you might look at it more positively by remembering that you ate a late meal because your college-age daughter came home to visit and you spent time talking with her instead of doing the dishes. Are you able to shift your awareness to something pleasant?

When you’re ready, continue to scan the area to notice something else and follow the process again. Carry on with this exercise as long as you like.

Consider briefly journaling your experience when you’re done.