

“Crystal Sutherland’s *Journey to Heal* is an empathetic guidebook for those suffering the ravages of past sexual abuse. Readers will discover a clear pathway through the muck toward wholeness and health in its pages, written by a survivor who understands.”

—Mary DeMuth, author of
Not Marked: Finding Hope and Healing After Sexual Abuse

“Sexual abuse hurts children at some of the deepest levels experienced in our broken world, but you don’t have to feel alone. Crystal Sutherland shares her own story of childhood sexual abuse as well as her experience of guiding other women through their journey of healing. If you want to enjoy the fullness of life that God promises, there are some important things that need to be done and some even more important truths to hold on to. This book can help you reject shame and discover God’s love and care. Whether you are afraid of looking at a wound covered up long ago or are afraid of being defined by someone else’s traumatic choices, this book can be your guide to wholeness.”

—Michael Prasse, MACC, LPC,
counselor specializing in abuse recovery

“I’m so thankful Crystal wrote *Journey to Heal*. This book is going to help so many people who have endured childhood sexual abuse. Crystal writes in a powerful and practical style. Let the healing begin.”

—Derwin L. Gray, lead pastor of Transformation Church,
author of *Crazy Grace for Crazy Times*

“You’ll find a compassionate friend in Crystal Sutherland, a gifted woman who understands the pain of sexual abuse and the healing that is available to those who have been wounded. Drawing from her own experience as an abuse survivor and writing from a courageous place of honesty and vulnerability, she lays out a hope-filled path to wholeness.”

—Becky Campbell Smith, songwriter, blogger, speaker

“As a survivor of sexual abuse, Crystal Sutherland provides a comprehensive approach to healing and living a life of freedom. *Journey to Heal* takes the reader through practical applications covered in grace and love. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is ready to be set free from the burden of childhood sexual abuse and to start walking victoriously!”

—Debbie Hancock, cofounder and
executive director of Compassion to Act

Journey to Heal



*Seven Essential Steps of Recovery for
Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

CRYSTAL M. SUTHERLAND

 Kregel
Publications

*Journey to Heal: Seven Essential Steps of Recovery for Survivors
of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

© 2016 by Crystal M. Sutherland

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial
Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval
system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical,
photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher,
except for brief quotations in reviews.

Distribution of digital editions of this book in any format via the Internet or any
other means without the publisher’s written permission or by license agreement is
a violation of copyright law and is subject to substantial fines and penalties. Thank
you for supporting the author’s rights by purchasing only authorized editions.

The author and publisher are not engaged in rendering medical or psychological
services, and this book is not intended as a guide to diagnose or treat medical or
psychological problems. If medical, psychological, or other expert assistance is
required, the reader should seek the services of a health care provider or certified
counselor.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible,
New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by
Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.
www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations marked *esv* are from The Holy Bible, English Standard
Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good
News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked *nasb* are from the New American Standard Bible®.
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The
Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Scripture quotations marked *nkjv* are from the New King James Version®.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked *nlt* are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation,
copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permis-
sion of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights
reserved.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4401-2

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 / 5 4 3 2 1

*For all women
wounded by childhood
sexual abuse*

Contents

Heartfelt Appreciation / 9

You're Not Alone / 11

Chapter One	Step 1: Commit to the Journey / 15
Chapter Two	Step 2: Face the Truth / 31
Chapter Three	There's No More Disgrace for You / 47
Chapter Four	Step 3: Share Your Story / 56
Chapter Five	Step 4: Settle the Unsettled / 66
Chapter Six	What Is God's Role in Your Story? / 78
Chapter Seven	Step 5: Forgive and Let It Go / 93
Chapter Eight	Step 6: Discover Your True Identity / 109
Chapter Nine	Step 7: Establish Your New Life in Christ / 121
Chapter Ten	There Is Hope for Experiencing Intimacy / 140

Continue in Your Journey of Faith / 159

Notes / 161

<i>Appendix A</i>	<i>A Prayer for Salvation</i> / 163
<i>Appendix B</i>	<i>A Prayer for Sexual Healing</i> / 165
<i>Appendix C</i>	<i>The "I Am" Statements of Worth</i> / 167
<i>Appendix D</i>	<i>Additional Resources for Recovery</i> / 169

About the Author / 171

Heartfelt Appreciation

This book has been a journey in itself to write, and I could not have traveled this far without the many people God has placed in my life to provide support and encouragement along the way. Honestly, I give God all the credit, because if it were not for him I wouldn't have been able to write this book. I am eternally thankful to you, my Savior and Friend.

I want to thank Dennis Hillman, Dawn Anderson, and all my friends at Kregel Publications for taking a chance on this first-time author and publishing this needed resource for survivors of sexual abuse. I am so very grateful to each of you. I also want to thank the women who bravely shared their journey with me and entrusted me with their stories—not only in our group, but for the purpose of this book as well. You are a beautiful reflection of God's redemptive power at work, and I am blessed to know you and call you friends.

Of course, I would not have found the courage to write and launch a women's recovery group if not for my friends at Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, who were there when the idea for this book was barely conceived, cheering me on and offering practical help. To Bishop Beall, Gene Lakey, Loree Pittenger, Mark Rigsbee, Selina Brassil, Tyler Daniels, Wayne Cooper, Debbie Hancock, and the many others (you all know who you are), I can't thank you enough for all your support.

To Mike Prasse, MACC, LPC, specializing in abuse recovery, who took time to share his expert knowledge and insight in order to help me

develop the Bible study that eventually led to the writing of this book, I am deeply indebted to you. To my friend Pastor Derwin L. Grey, who has been a consistent source of encouragement, wisdom, and support both during my years in seminary and in the writing of this book, you are the real deal and I am blessed to call you a friend.

To my dear friend Ramona for spending days scouring over my first drafts—using a lot of red ink—your support and encouragement were a godsend, and I am so thankful for you. To the many friends and family members who took time to read parts of my manuscript, offered their encouragement, and prayed for this work to come about, may God richly bless you!

I'd like to especially thank Lynn Cowell, who let me borrow her stacks of Proverbs 31 Ministries She Speaks Conference materials when I first began writing this book. Your generosity and encouragement helped to point me in the right direction. Thank you, sweet friend.

For my precious children, there aren't enough words of gratitude that I can express. You have been there through my journey of healing and you have supported and encouraged me through the grueling process of writing this work. I love each of you so much, and I am blessed to be your mom.

Finally, to my husband, Wes, who has been my rock for twenty-six years. Your patience and enduring love have allowed me the space I needed to heal. I cannot adequately express in words what you have done for me. I love you with all my heart; thank you for tirelessly supporting me through both recovery and the writing of this book.

You're Not Alone

Am I worthless? Do I matter to God? When will it stop hurting so much? These questions, and many others like them, plagued my heart for years. I believe they weigh on the soul of any woman who has been wounded by childhood sexual abuse. The years of silence, the lies believed, and the painful memories involved become too much to handle on our own. Before long we are making choices that lead to more pain—even abuse.

Perhaps this describes your story and that is why you picked up this book.

Dear friend, I am so glad you did.

If you're like me, you have felt alone and afraid—unsure of where to begin on the road to recovery. Maybe you think you're the only one who has ever been through what you've experienced and no one else knows how you feel. Let me assure you that you are not alone. Millions of us—men and women alike—have been traumatized by childhood sexual abuse. It is one of the worst best-kept secrets of our culture today.

Perhaps you've sought counseling, but you haven't found any lasting relief. Maybe you've turned to friends and family, but they don't understand your struggles and are unable to offer any helpful solutions. The truth is, healing from childhood sexual abuse is a long and complex process. There are no quick fixes or simple solutions. Ultimately, healing is a journey that requires God's help.

If we could sit down and talk over a cup of coffee, I would reach across the table, grab your hand, and tell you that you're going to get through this and come out fine on the other side. I would tell you that I know what you're going through, because I've traveled this road myself. I imagine you feel like you are at the end of your rope about now and need someone to talk to—someone who gets it and actually understands what your struggle is. You need a friend who has been in the same dark place and knows the way out. My hope is that as you read this book you'll consider me just such a friend.

I have been where you are now, searching and hoping for honest answers to my questions and valid assurances that I would be all right. I know what it means to have been neglected, abandoned, betrayed, and misused by the ones I love and who should have loved me the most. I have been down the road of suffering and lived the life of one who had no sense of self-worth. I have seen the ugliness of human nature and have been the victim of unspeakable things.

While there were different paths I took, trying to heal from the pain I felt inside, only one led me to freedom: my relationship with Jesus Christ. Dear friend, I am convinced that healing only happens when we place our hope in Jesus Christ. He has restored me in ways I didn't think possible—healing me through the love of family, the church, and the truth of his Word. He has guided my steps and helped me find my way in overcoming years of guilt and shame, bringing me to the place of freedom I enjoy today.

I have no doubt that if you entrust your journey to him, he will ultimately do the same for you: healing your brokenness and leading you into freedom. It will take time, and you will experience setbacks, but I can assure you that God is *for* you and he will be *with* you each step of the way.

As God brought healing and restoration into my life, he encouraged me to share my journey with others. At his urging, I wrote and led a women's Bible study for survivors of childhood sexual abuse and assault, based on the biblical principles God taught me during my own recovery.

While leading that study, I also had an opportunity to share my testimony of healing with women in a local addiction recovery center—many

of whom were sexually abused as children. Through these experiences, it became clear to me that women of all ages, backgrounds, and stages of recovery are searching for a clear path to healing. That is when I felt the need to write *Journey to Heal*.

This is not a personal memoir, although I do share parts of my story along with the stories of several women I've mentored through this study. Rather, this is a road map to recovery. It is a travel guide for your journey, based on what God has shown me to be true in my own life. I don't believe there is a one-size-fits-all remedy for the pain we feel, but I've come to realize through my own experience that there are essential steps we must take and biblical truths we must apply to our lives in order to fully heal.

My story doesn't end in abuse and brokenness, and neither does yours.

We may not be able to share our hearts over coffee, but it is my hope that as you read the pages ahead you will find encouragement, inspiration, and guidance for your journey. Know that you are not alone. You're going to make it through this and God won't waste any of it.

I am so excited to share this journey with you. There is no doubt that we have connected by divine appointment, and I am praying God will use this book to heal your heart.

STEP 1: Commit to the Journey

*Jesus stopped and called them.
“What do you want me to do for you?”*

—MATTHEW 20:32

My parents were teenagers when I was born. I guess you could say I was a happy accident. They married because of me and divorced when I was about two. There were a lot of issues between them I didn't understand growing up. All I knew was that my mother had custody of me, and my father lived a short plane ride away. He called now and then, sent me gifts, and offered occasional visits, but that would be the extent of his role in my life until my late teens.

In my father's absence, my mother was left with the majority of my care. I believe she did the best that she could. She was young and I was unplanned; there were many stressors involved.

My mother went through a series of relationships and remarried again when I was about ten years old. She became pregnant with my first sibling and, overall, life seemed to be going pretty well. Her new husband was kind in the beginning—even acted as a father figure for a time. He played

games with me and taught me how to shoot hoops and catch a baseball. For the first time in a long while, my mom seemed really happy, and that made me happy too.

With her own set of painful childhood memories to process and the stress of single parenthood, my mother sometimes took out her frustrations on me. Her reactions to my childhood blunderings were often violent and loud. As much as I loved my mother, I grew to be afraid of her at an early age. This new man in our lives seemed to bring some balance to both of us.

For the first time I can remember, it felt like I had a real family. We played together, took trips to fun places, and ate meals in our dining room. It all seemed perfect, until the night everything changed.

I remember it was late and my stepfather and I had stayed up to watch a show, as we often would, while my mother had gone to bed. He started a tickle fight, and soon we were wrestling around on the living-room floor. I always enjoyed our tickle fights and silly games, but this time was different.

He suggested we pretend to be puppies. That sounded fun, so we did. For a while, it was just that—the two of us on all fours, crawling around like puppies in the dark. With the television going in the background, and my mother asleep upstairs, he would catch me, tickle me, and I would squirm away.

After a short while the game changed. He said, “Let’s be like real puppies. Real puppies don’t wear clothes.” So he took off his pants and undergarments and told me to remove mine. I reluctantly followed his instructions—unsure, but still believing this was just another part of our silly game.

Everything changed in that instant. He grabbed me, sat me on his lap, and began touching and rubbing all over me. I was scared stiff, not understanding what was happening but knowing it was very wrong. I began to cry and told him it was nasty, asking him to stop. He agreed, said he was sorry, begged me not to tell my mother, and promised that he would never do it again. I believed him and complied.

Not wanting to upset my mother and our new family life, I didn’t tell her what he did that night. I convinced myself it was a terrible mistake

that would never happen again. Unfortunately, it did. That night was the beginning of a series of many broken promises. He continued to escalate his molestations over the next few years, always concluding the same way: saying he was sorry, begging me not to tell my mother, and promising never to do it again.

Lots of changes happened in our family over the course of the next several years, but one thing remained constant: his abuse. He knew what he was doing was wrong but couldn't seem to stop himself. Though I often threatened to tell my mother, I couldn't find the courage to actually follow through with it. I was crippled by my fear of her reaction and sure she would somehow blame me for it. The longer I waited, the worse I felt.

When I was about thirteen years old, my family began to regularly attend a little church not far from our home. It was one of those old-time, Bible-thumping, Pentecostal Holiness churches where the preacher shouts and the choir often sings off-key. I thank God for churches like these, because it was during one of the pastor's many hellfire-and-brimstone messages that I became aware of my own sin and need for forgiveness. As the pastor invited everyone to pray with him, I repeated his every word, asking Jesus to forgive my sins and come to live in my heart and change my life.

To be honest, my initial decision for Christ was made out of a fear of hell. I remember being horrified by the thought of it and sure that God would send me there—not only for my own sins but for what my stepfather was doing to me as well. I didn't understand at that time that God loved me and wanted a relationship with me. Furthermore, the idea of God being a loving Father was confusing in light of my circumstances at home. As a result, our relationship started out on a fragile footing.

Fortunately, God's love is relentless. He used everything from the Sunday school lessons to the hymns we sang in church to reveal his unconditional love for me, drawing me closer and closer to him. Looking back now I can see where he was at work in my life, strengthening and encouraging me through Scripture, friends, teachers, and mentors, and eventually giving me the courage I needed to break the silence about the abuse.

I was fifteen years old when I told my mother what my stepfather was

doing to me. By that point I was ready to do whatever it took to make it stop. I had already considered several alternatives that were far worse than anything my mother could do or say to me. Honestly, I had even considered suicide if that was what it would take to end my nightmare.

Her response turned out to be what I had feared the most: she blamed me. She suggested that I had led him on because I often wore a T-shirt and underwear to bed, and she questioned why I didn't tell her sooner. Her words were devastating then, but I now realize they were spoken more out of shock and fear than anything else. She was so overwhelmed by my news that she left for a couple of days to process it all. I wasn't sure if she was coming back, but it didn't matter. I wasn't afraid anymore—not of her and not of him.

That day marked the end of several years of sexual abuse.

While I cannot be sure, it is my impression that my mother came home determined to keep our family intact, regardless of how dysfunctional it was. I remember being confronted with the option of “I can divorce him and your sister can grow up without a father, like you, or we can make this work. It's your choice.” At that time, I didn't know I had any other options.

I didn't realize that what my stepfather did to me was illegal, or that there could be any legal consequences for his actions. As a result, the authorities were never involved. I couldn't see a choice in my mother's words, and so we all remained together under the same roof for a few more years.

As you can imagine, the next days, weeks, and months were extremely tense and difficult. Hurtful words and accusations flew around, and many were directed at me. I fell into a deeper sense of hopelessness and despair, and plunged into a downward spiral of bad choices.

By seventeen I was looking for validation and acceptance in all the wrong places, eventually finding myself in a painful circumstance one afternoon with a boy I knew from school. Things started out innocently enough, but he began to make advances that I couldn't control. Wanting nothing more to do with me, the boy moved on to his next conquest. He was my first, and nine months later my first child was born.

After discovering I was pregnant, life at home became even more dif-

ficult and the tensions between my mother and me worsened. As a teen mom, I found high school even more challenging than ever before. I became so physically sick from all the stress that at one point I had to be taken to the hospital and put on muscle relaxers. To make matters even more complicated, I had started dating someone pretty seriously not long after the incident with the boy I knew from school. For a short time, I thought he might be my baby's father and because of that we made plans to get married. While those plans never came to fruition, we remained in a serious dating relationship for a couple of years.

He was a good person, and seemed to really care for me. His mother was kind and saw my need for help. She invited my daughter and me to come and live with her and her family until I could get on my feet. So a few months after my baby was born, I packed us up and moved us out.

I could go on and share the details of what followed, but that would be better suited for the pages of a personal memoir. What matters most is that I was a wreck—very confused and, in spite of my earlier decision for Christ, very far from God. Thankfully, God remains faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful to him. He continues to love us unconditionally, even when we fail to love him in return.

I believe God gave me the courage to speak out about the abuse, to persevere through my unplanned pregnancy, to graduate from high school, and to overcome the many difficulties involved in being a single mom. He provided the love and guidance I needed at one of the most critical times in my life, making a way for me to care for my daughter and eventually to attend college.

God was very patient with me; I continued to make plenty of poor choices along the way. It would be years before I realized what my stepfather did to me was a crime and in no way my fault. Up to that point, I carried a lot of guilt and shame, unaware of the connections between the trauma of sexual abuse and the emotional struggles I was having as a young woman. It didn't occur to me that some of my thought processes and the poor decisions I was making were the direct result of my wounds of abuse.

My primary goal in my twenties was to finish college and make something of myself. I wanted to forget about the past and get on with life. The

last thing I wanted to do was talk about the abuse, much less deal with it. I tucked it all away and ignored the painful memories for a long time.

I was in my thirties, married, and a stay-at-home mother of two before I began to recognize the impact the abuse had on my life. All the years of hiding from the past had kept me from dealing with my emotional wounds and now my whole world seemed to be falling apart. That is when God began to speak to my heart through his Word and place people in my path to encourage me to face my past and begin the journey to heal.

I'm in my forties now, celebrating twenty-plus years of marriage to my husband, Wes. So far, we have three children, a son-in-law, and two grandchildren. God has restored my relationship with my mother, healed my marriage, and brought me closer to my biological father than I would have thought possible.

The memories of the abuse are still there, but they have faded into the background of a very happy life. I can honestly say that because of Jesus Christ my life is blessed and my wounds are healed. The journey hasn't ended for me, but my heart is full and finally at peace. That is the kind of healing I hope you will discover as we take this journey together.

Are You Ready for This?

So where are you in the journey? Are you the twenty-something who is just trying to live her life day by day, finish college, or build a career? Perhaps you're the thirty-something who is realizing there is a connection between the pain of your past and the troubles you're dealing with today, or maybe you are the forty-something finally ready to face the past and begin to heal.

Wherever you are in the process, know that healing from childhood sexual abuse is a tedious and painful process. There are no quick fixes, even though I've heard of plenty. The truth is, this journey is long, and it is filled with peaks and valleys. Keeping on a path to freedom requires a great deal of courage and perseverance. Painful memories must be dealt with, and unresolved feelings settled. It can be uncomfortable and messy.

While the idea of dredging up a negative past is uncomfortable, looking back is often required in order to find the freedom to move ahead. Perhaps you don't trust your memories about the abuse. Maybe you've

been told not to dwell on the past and have kept quiet because you don't want to upset certain relationships. I get that, and I have been there.

Dear friend, addressing the past is not a matter of dwelling on it as much as it is a part of the process of sorting through it. To heal from the wounds of abuse, we must ultimately address those wounds. That will require some level of looking back at our stories in order to process our memories and address the effects involved.

Have you ever sustained a bad cut? If so, you've most likely developed a nasty scab. Scabs are the human body's version of a Band-Aid. They cover the wound and protect it from outside elements. However, if that cut wasn't addressed properly to begin with, we run the risk of infection.

I'm sure you've seen an infected wound. It's gross, isn't it? Where there was once a cut, now it's a scabby oozing mess. In order to heal properly, the wound needs to be properly dressed. That involves removing that nasty scab in order to expose the source of the infection. And that can be a painful process.

Emotional wounds are like deep cuts in our soul. They need to be tended to properly in order to heal. If we don't take care of our emotional wounds, they will only fester and get worse. This has been true in my own life. My untended wounds festered into serious problems that ultimately led me to face my past.

I imagine your wounds aren't looking too great right now, either. Most likely that is why you've picked up this book. At some point or other those wounds will need to be addressed, and that's why you'll need to commit to the work of healing. This commitment is the first essential step in your journey of healing. It's the foundation of all the other steps, yet it can be the hardest one to take.

Jesus understands our fears. He knows that for many of us, myself included, it can seem easier to cope with an infected wound than to go through any more pain. What if it doesn't work? What if we go through all this trouble and we're no better off than when we started? The whole process can feel uncertain—like we're fumbling around in the dark.

Matthew 20:29–34 gives an account of two blind men who begged for healing. This story perfectly describes the position I was in when my journey began and perhaps the one that you find yourself in right now.

Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho after a long stint of ministry, moving on to the next town. Along the way, they came across two blind men begging on the roadside. When these men heard that Jesus was passing by they shouted, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” People among the crowd told them to be quiet, but they shouted again, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”

Now, this is where it gets interesting. Matthew wrote that Jesus didn’t immediately respond to their request. Instead, he turned and asked them a question, one that required some commitment on their part: “What do you want me to do for you?”

The two blind men replied, “Lord, we want our sight!”

The Bible goes on to say, “Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.”

Let’s take a closer look at this passage. Here are these two men begging along the side of the road, for who knows how long. Then they heard of this man Jesus, the Messiah, who was going about healing the sick and casting out demons. I imagine after days of sitting along the dusty roadside—in darkness and inhibited by their circumstances—these two blind men were desperate and obviously in need of healing. Yet Jesus still asks the question, *What do you want me to do for you?*

Wasn’t it obvious?

Jesus knew they were blind. He already had a plan in mind, *yet* he asked the question anyway. Why? He wanted them to consider the weight of what they were asking for: Were they ready to live in the light? Did they understand that sight would change their perspective and even their daily lifestyle? Having lived in darkness for who knows how long (the Bible doesn’t say), they would now need to learn how to walk in the light.

Were they ready for that?

Are *you* ready?

After living with our wounds of abuse for so long, it can be easy to fall into a mind-set of coping with our pain, settling for mere survival instead of learning how to thrive. The notion of living free from the past may be enticing, but it can also seem frightening. The truth is, the familiarity of brokenness is easier to navigate than the unknown terrain of wholeness. For that reason, we may attempt to sabotage potential happiness because

we fear what that might look like. I have seen this at work in my own life and in the lives of other survivors I know.

The essence of the question Jesus asked these two men is the same question that applies to us today. It is my question to you, dear friend. Are you ready to break free from the pain of the past and venture into the beautiful life God has for you? Even more than that, are you willing to do your part in the journey to heal?

The more I come to know Christ, the more I realize he will step in and rescue us at times, but more often than not he chooses to lead us out of the pit we find ourselves in. He was leading these two blind men to make a decision for a better way of life. I know he desires the same from you.

I realize that healing emotionally is more involved than miraculously regaining sight. While some women may experience miraculous deliverance from the wounds of sexual abuse, most of us will find recovery to be a process—a journey, if you will. Sexual abuse leaves a soul wound that only God can heal. It takes time and commitment to the journey, and we must be willing to take certain essential steps.

Over the past few years I've had the great privilege of mentoring several women at different stages in their journey to heal, through sharing the precepts of this book and the steps leading to recovery. Some of them have given me permission to share parts of their stories with you through this book, with the hope that their journey of healing will be an encouragement to you in yours.

While their stories are different, and their journeys unique, they all shared a common desire to heal and a commitment to do their part. That is the essential step I am encouraging you to take: to commit to healing and the work involved in that process.

Only God Can Heal a Soul Wound

For years I didn't understand that my behavior, emotions, and self-image were dramatically influenced by the abuse I suffered as a child. All I knew was that I hurt on the inside, in the deep places of my heart. From the outside, my life seemed to be going great, but on the inside, I was a wreck.

Like so many survivors, I was determined to ignore the past and focus

on the present. I kept busy with life, and that busyness seemed to help me survive. This survival mode kept me from addressing my brokenness.

Whenever I sensed painful memories swelling toward the surface, I would sooth myself by indulging in certain activities. It was like rewarding myself for having endured the wounds inflicted on me as a child. I turned to food, shopping, and staying busy *all* the time. These vices helped me to keep the pain at bay, and avoid, avoid, avoid!

Does any of this sound familiar to you?

Food was a great source of comfort. For years I considered most any carbohydrate a close friend. Bread, chips, sweets, soda, and cheesy pasta were all welcome in my home.

Shopping was another source of comfort. When I felt bad about myself, I'd shop. When I felt alone, I'd take myself to the local mall. When I experienced conflict or stress in my marriage, Target was my home away from home. Shopping was a means of escape from reality, if only for a few short hours. With a Caramel Macchiato in one hand and my pocketbook in the other, I could slip into my own little world. Unfortunately, my escapes never solved anything—my problems were still there.

I abused myself with food, and I temporarily avoided my issues through the distraction of retail therapy. If that wasn't enough, I kept busy with all sorts of activities. I was the queen of overachievement. Perfection was my goal. If there was a need for volunteers at church, I was there. I was on every committee I could commit to and nearly wore myself out in the process. I became overstressed and unbearable to be around.

But nothing I did made any difference in how I felt about myself. In fact, my attempts at soothing myself often compounded my problems. I was disgusted with myself most of the time, and that led to feelings of depression and anxiety. It was clear I was not on a path that led to healing, and I became painfully aware that I could not achieve healing on my own. I was ready for a change.

The pain of abuse can carve a deep hole into our hearts. The lies we believe and the hurts we feel only deepen our wounds over time. Eventually, we begin to make life choices out of our pain, and that can lead to more wounds. I call this self-abuse.

Self-abuse involves vices like heavy drinking, drug abuse, overeating,

overspending, or isolating ourselves from others. For example, we might choose to reward ourselves for making it through another day by eating our favorite comfort foods. We might run to the local Target to pick up a few things, only to fill up our baskets with stuff we don't need because we can and because it makes us feel good in the moment.

Vices provide only a brief source of comfort. Like a Band-Aid, they temporarily mask the true source of our pain. Even our relationships with family members can become a means of avoiding the need to address our deeper issues. We can only hide from our pain for so long. Eventually the unhealed wounds from our past will cause us serious problems in the present.

Consider how many men and women struggle with obesity, alcoholism, drug addictions, cutting, and other such issues. How often are these issues the result of internal problems they haven't fully dealt with? It can seem easier, in the moment, to reach for a doughnut, grab a drink, or snort a line in order to numb the pain one feels inside, but doing so only leads to more trouble in the long run.

It took time for me to realize that I was not going to find the healing I needed in the food I consumed or in the material comforts I purchased. Healing was only going to happen when I fully surrendered my wounds to God.

The same is true for you.

Maybe you've picked up this book because you are at the end of yourself. You've tried to heal your own soul, soothing yourself with temporary vices of comfort. In spite of your efforts, the memories of abuse and the unresolved emotions it caused are still weighing heavily on your heart. You realize it's time to deal with the past, but you have no idea where to begin.

You are exactly where you need to be to begin the journey ahead, because it is at our place of greatest need that God can do his greatest work in us.

Make the Commitment to Yourself

As strange as it may sound, it is sometimes easier to remain rooted in the pit of our problems than to get up, get out, and walk the unfamiliar road toward wholeness. Let's be real. The pit is familiar.

When we decide it's time to address the pain of our past, it can feel like we are taking a huge step into the unknown. I knew what the landscape of brokenness looked like. The negative messages of my wounds became my daily mantra: I'm not wanted, I don't matter, and I'm worthless. These messages were the filter through which I viewed myself, and they were the reason I made many poor choices. Perhaps you have found yourself in the same position today, and you are ready for a change.

Healing from sexual abuse will require action on your part. It involves making a commitment to yourself to do what it takes. When you make that commitment, you are saying that you'll see this process through to the end, no matter how you feel. This commitment will ultimately require the act of surrender, but it is only when we surrender our wounds to God that real healing can begin.

I don't know your story, but I know from my personal journey that complete healing won't happen without two things on your part: commitment and surrender. Without these two constantly at work during the process, wholeness will always be just out of reach—something other people seem to enjoy, but not you. The issues that plague your life now will remain, and your relationships will continue to suffer. I'm not trying to scare you—just prepare you.

All the hurt I had stuffed down deep in my heart surfaced later in my first marriage. Those wounds would resurface again in my second marriage. The same issues that I struggled with in the first were there again; fear, insecurity, a need to control everything, perfectionism, flashbacks, triggers, misplaced anger, and an irrational expectation that my husband should be my perfect hero (all of which I address later in this book).

Perhaps you have experienced similar patterns in your own life. It could be that you have struggled with keeping close friendships, holding a marriage together, or maintaining a healthy relationship with family members. There may be situations you are facing now that have come about due to unsettled emotions you have about your past.

Dear friend, what do you want Jesus to do for you?

At age fifteen, God helped me to find the courage to break the silence surrounding the abuse and finally tell my mother what had been happening to me for years. As an adult, I came to another point of decision, and

God gave me the courage to trust him and commit to the process of healing. Making that choice ultimately led me to the wholeness and freedom I experience today.

God has the power to heal your brokenness, lift the weight of shame, and lead you into a brand-new life. He has done it for me, and I know he can do the same for you. While God could choose to heal you in an instant, he will most likely require that you play an active role in your recovery.

Are you ready to take that step and commit to the work ahead?

Move Forward

Reading this book is a starting point for your journey to heal, but it's not the cure. The truth is, we don't have the power to mend our own brokenness. Only God can heal a soul wound, and healing happens when we place our hope in Christ.

I won't lie to you. If you choose to face the past and deal with it, there will be moments, even days, when you'll ask yourself, *Why am I doing this?* At times you will want to tuck it all away and try to forget. You may even wonder if taking this journey will make any difference at all.

I can assure you that healing will take time, and there will be instances when you feel as if you're getting worse instead of better. You may experience setbacks. You may feel overwhelmed by the different emotions that surface.

When it becomes too much, just remember this is a journey, not a race. You can stop for a while, breathe, and come back to it. The key is to keep moving forward at your own pace and finish well.

The chapters ahead are dedicated to certain key steps and important truths that are essential to the healing process. I've gleaned them from biblical truths and personal experience. While each step is the foundation for the next, some will take longer than others. Allow yourself the time you need to process each chapter.

Each of the first nine chapters is followed by a section called Journey Essentials. These sections are designed to help you process the concepts shared in these chapters and take any action steps involved. It is important to your healing to complete each Journey Essential before moving ahead.

I also encourage you to purchase a personal journal as a companion to this book. I discuss the importance of this journal more in the next chapter and will refer to it throughout as your Truth Journal. Your journal will be a means to document your journey and the discoveries you make along the way. My hope for you is that by the time we are finished, it will be a written testimony of God's redeeming work in your life.

Finally, I urge you to read the Bible daily, starting with the Scriptures I provide in each chapter, as well as in the Journey Essentials. I've provided five readings in each of the Journey Essentials, so you can read one each weekday. Allow God to renew your mind and transform your heart through the power of his Word. He will lead you to healing, as only he can.

Dear friend, I want you to know that the path you are preparing to take will positively impact not only your life but the lives of those you love as well. I believe that God is going to set you free and heal your life so that you can become all he has created you to be.

I am very thankful to be a small part of your journey. Even though we may not meet in person, I would be honored to share in your discoveries as you read through the following chapters. Please feel free to reach out to me via email or connect through Facebook. I am praying for you as you move forward in your journey to heal, and I am so excited for all God has in store for you ahead.

JOURNEY ESSENTIALS

*I can do all this through him
who gives me strength.*

—PHILIPPIANS 4:13

YOU CAN DO THIS with God's help. You can heal from childhood sexual abuse. It's time to put on your most comfortable walking shoes, stand up for yourself, and start moving forward. In order to help you on your way, I want you to read and complete each section below. As tempting as it may be, try not to move on to the next chapter until you allow yourself this opportunity to process and grow.

Write down specifically what you would like Jesus to do for you.

Pray. Dear Jesus, thank you for bringing me to this point of decision. I surrender my wounds to you now and ask for your help as I embark on this journey of healing. Please give me the courage and strength I will need to walk this road, and direct me in every step I need to take. Thank you in advance for all you will do in my heart through this journey. In your name I pray, amen.

Read. Job 5:11; Psalm 119:105; Psalm 147:3; Isaiah 41:10; Isaiah 61:1

Document your journey. Complete healing comes from God, through the power of his Holy Spirit. I encourage you to get in the Word daily. Make a point to set aside a few minutes each day to read the Bible and talk to God about what you are feeling, facing, and working through.

I encourage you to journal your thoughts, prayers, and any discoveries you make along the way. I challenge you to make this exercise a part of your daily routine. You will be amazed at what a profound impact it will have on your overall perspective, self-confidence, and courage as you journey ahead.

Develop a thankful heart. Take a moment to journal what you're thankful for. Even in the worst circumstances, there is something to be thankful for: another day of life, friends, food, shelter, sunshine, and the breath we breathe—even this study. Developing an attitude of gratitude can dramatically change your life.