

Journey to Heal



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

**A Leader's Guide for
Small Group Study**

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Dear group leader,

Welcome to the *Journey to Heal* small group study. I hope you find this group guide helpful in your effort to lead women to hope and healing through the message of this book. Use this guide as tool for how to structure your group sessions, but understand that you have complete flexibility in how to arrange your group meetings in a way that best suits the needs of your group.

As you are already aware, childhood sexual abuse is a crime that deeply traumatizes a victim and leaves a soul wound that can take a lifetime to heal. There are no quick fixes or one-size-fits-all remedies. For that reason, it is important to lead group members with the understanding that each member will process the concepts of each chapter in this book in their own way and at their own pace.

I recommend that you work out in advance how often your group will meet. You may feel that meeting every other week, or once a month is best. Leave room for flexibility in your plans. If you can see that a group member is simply not ready to move on to the next chapter, consider working out some one-on-one time with her outside of the group, but continue moving forward with the study for the rest of your group.

As a group leader, your goal should be to provide a safe environment for members to share their stories openly and discuss any takeaways they have from the book, while encouraging them to continue moving forward in their journey to heal. Avoid giving personal advice, even if a group member asks for it. The focus of group discussions should be on group member takeaways and the application of the biblical truths and practical steps provided in the book. In this way you can avoid saying something that may set a group member back in their journey to heal.

Most of all, cover your group in prayer. They will need it, and so will you. The first five sessions will be your most challenging, and the remaining three will be easier to facilitate. Prepare your heart and mind for what

is ahead by first reading the book yourself. Through the course of this book, ask God to be at the center of your efforts and to give you the words to say as you lead women toward the hope and healing found only in Jesus Christ.

Walking alongside,

Crystal

Note: If you'd like, you can copy and distribute the following letter to group members.

Dear group member,

I am so excited for you to take this step toward healing from childhood sexual abuse. If I could, I would give you a big hug and tell you how happy I am for you. You are embarking on a life-changing journey that will equip you to finally walk in freedom from your past.

As you embark on this group study, remember this: healing from sexual abuse is a process and each of us process differently. For that reason, I want to encourage you to travel ahead at your own pace. Don't be discouraged if your journey of healing takes longer than someone else's. What matters most is that you are moving toward the life of wholeness God has for you.

I am praying for you. And I invite you to share your journey by reaching out to me through my website at crystalsutherland.org, or on Facebook at facebook.com/crystal.sutherland. I can't wait to hear how God heals your heart and transforms your life.

Walking alongside,

Crystal

Suggestions for Small Group Study

Group Format/Location

The group environment must foster love and trust. It is recommended that there are no more than five members in a group, unless the group is facilitated online. This size allows space for everyone to get to know each other, build trust, and have the opportunity to share their hearts freely within the group. Because of the difficult nature of the content that will be discussed, meetings should be held in a private, neutral place, where group members can feel at ease. To honor each group member and her commitment to recovery, it is recommended that the group be closed to any new members after the first week. It is also very important that each member understands that anything shared in the group is confidential.

Materials Needed

Each group member needs her own copy of *Journey to Heal: Seven Essential Steps of Recovery for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, a personal journal, and access to a Bible. (If they don't already have one, they can find various Bible translations online at sites like www.biblegateway.com and www.biblestudytools.com.) Provide boxes of tissues at each group meeting.

Meeting Format

Allot two hours for meetings. Group members should be encouraged to read the chapter(s) and complete the Journey Essentials homework prior to each group session. While there are many ways to conduct a group meeting, at minimum each meeting should include a time of prayer and a guided discussion of the group questions provided for that week. Especially during the first session or two, group members may not feel comfortable praying aloud. Come prepared to do all the praying, but encourage other members to participate, as they feel able. A time for

food and fellowship are always good, but keep in mind that time can easily slip away with such a heavy topic being discussed. You may want to set this time at the beginning of your group meeting as women are arriving and getting settled in.

In Preparation for Session One

Be sure that each group member has the materials needed in plenty of time to prepare for the first group session. Encourage group members to bring their journal along to group meetings so they can refer back to it and add thoughts that arise from group discussions.

Step 1: Commit to the Journey

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

—MATTHEW 20:32 (NIV)

Welcome to the first session of your group journey. You are at the starting point of a life-changing experience. It’s exciting and a little scary, all at the same time. This is an important week because this session will set the stage for the weeks ahead. In taking this first step, group members will establish resolve to keep on the path toward wholeness.

Group leaders: Allow time for group members to meet and connect with one another in a relaxed atmosphere. Provide light refreshments and play soft music. Make the space you meet in as pleasant as you can. In this first meeting, you will want to explain the parameters of the group going forward, so that everyone feels safe to freely share their stories, thoughts, and emotions.

Group members: In preparation for this first meeting group members should have read the first chapter and completed the Journey Essentials at the end. By the end of the session, each member should be prepared to commit to the work ahead.

Icebreaker: Go around the room and have everyone share their name, where they are from, and their all-time favorite food.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What made you decide to join this group?
2. What have you already done to pursue healing and recovery?
3. What do you hope to gain from this book, specifically?
4. What were some of your takeaways from the first chapter?
5. Among the five Scripture passages given in the Journey Essentials for this chapter, which ones resonated with you, and why?
6. What do you want Jesus to do for you, through this book?
7. Are you ready to commit to the work ahead?

Group member homework: Read chapter two and complete the Journey Essentials for that chapter. Be prepared for chapter two to be one of the more difficult chapters to process in our journey together. It is especially important for this chapter that you allow yourself some quiet time alone to read through and process its concepts, and complete the homework involved. This chapter will help you process your story of abuse, and identify its effects on your life.

Close in prayer.

Step 2: Face the Truth

*Then you will know the truth, and the truth
will set you free.*

—JOHN 8:32 (NIV)

Facing the reality of your story, and acknowledging it as truth, is an essential step in the recovery process. As difficult as this may be, there is a great deal of freedom that will come from moving forward in this part of your group journey. I pray you will allow yourself to fully embrace this opportunity to bring what has been tormenting you in the dark out into the light, where it can be dealt with in a healthy way.

Group leaders: This chapter may be an especially difficult one to process for group members. This may mean that you need to allow extra time for the group to work through the application of writing down their stories. Perhaps allow an extra week before your group meets again, if you feel that is necessary.

Group members: In preparation for this meeting group members should have read chapter two and have completed the Journey Essentials at the end. Group members should have begun the process of writing down their stories of abuse, and identifying the effects of their stories on their lives. Each member should be prepared to share their takeaways from this chapter.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are some of your takeaways from this particular chapter?
2. How has defining sexual abuse been helpful to you?
3. As you have begun to journal your story, what has become apparent to you?
4. How has the act of writing down your story been helpful to you?
5. Can you describe how the abuse has affected you as an adult?
6. Among the five Scripture passages given in the Journey Essentials for this chapter, what were your favorites, and why?
7. What were some of your favorite things you are thankful for that you listed in your Truth Journal?

Group member homework: Read chapter three and four and complete the Journey Essentials for each chapter. There are two chapters to read and process for the next session, however you will find they go hand in hand. Allow yourself the quiet time to read and process the applications involved. These two chapters will help you process feelings of guilt and shame, and prepare your heart to share your story of abuse with others.

Close in prayer.

Step 3: Share Your Story

*Fear not: you will no longer live in shame.
Don't be afraid; there is no more disgrace for
you. You will no longer remember the shame of
your youth.*

—ISAIAH 54:4 (NLT)

First and foremost, whether you were sexually abused as a child or assaulted as an adult, it is important that you understand you are not at fault. Even though you may feel in some way responsible, you are in no way to blame. As you have begun to process your story, I hope this truth has become more evident to you. It's time to openly talk about your story and redirect any blame you've taken upon yourself to where it truly belongs.

Group leaders: This week may be an especially difficult one to process for group members, due to the level of transparency and vulnerability required. But, it's important to reassure members that in sharing their stories they not only allow themselves to heal, but they will empower others in the group to do the same. It is in talking about our stories that the weight of shame is lifted and deep healing can begin.

Group members: In preparation for this session, group members should have read chapters three and four and have completed the Journey Essentials at the end of each chapter. Each member should be prepared to share her takeaways from these two chapters.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Among the five Scripture passages given in the Journey Essentials for this chapter, what were your favorites, and why?
2. Do you blame yourself for the abuse you suffered? If so, in what way?
3. In chapter three, you were asked to identify the real source of your feelings of worthlessness or shame. What was your discovery?
4. In looking back at your story, who have you identified as someone you were powerless against, and why? It is common to have more than one.
5. Have you ever shared your story of abuse with someone, other than within this group?
6. How did that go for you, and in what way did you find it helpful?
7. If you have not yet shared your story, have you identified someone you can safely share it with?

Group member homework: Read chapter five and complete the Journey Essentials for that chapter. Allow yourself the quiet time to read and process the applications involved. This chapter will help you to work through any unresolved feelings you may have toward those you were powerless against. It will begin to prepare your heart for the healing work of forgiveness.

Close in prayer.

Step 4: Settle the Unsettled

See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

—HEBREWS 12:15

To heal from the deep wound of childhood sexual abuse, or any offense for that matter, we need to acknowledge how we feel about it and work through those emotions with God's help. We need to be intentional in identifying and constructively releasing any unresolved feelings of anger or resentment. That is the purpose of this step in our journey together, and it is in taking this step that you will prepare your heart for the healing work of forgiveness.

Group leaders: This step is a particularly difficult one to take. On the surface some group members may feel no anger toward their abusers, but resentments may become evident as they talk about certain family members or situations they are currently dealing with. Allow time for women to share discoveries from this chapter, and listen carefully. More often than not, group members will discover their own hidden resentments and repressed anger as they share.

Group members: In preparation for this session group members should have read chapter five and completed the Journey Essentials at the end of that chapter prior to coming to group. Each member should be prepared to share her takeaways from this chapter, and any unresolved feelings she may struggle with concerning the abuse.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Among the Scripture passages provided in the Journey Essentials for these two chapters, which ones resonate most with you?
2. What has God revealed to your heart as you've processed this chapter?
3. Do you struggle with anger or resentment toward your abuser(s)?
4. What would you say is driving those emotions the most?
5. Are there areas in your life where you can see these emotions are causing damage?
6. What are you currently doing to constructively release these emotions?
7. After identifying who you are angry with and why, have you begun writing your anger letter(s) and has that been helpful to you? If so, in what way?

Group member homework: For the next group session you will need to read chapters six and seven and complete the Journey Essentials for each chapter. Allow yourself the quiet time to read and process the applications involved. These chapters will help to answer some of your questions concerning God's role in your story and your role in his. They will challenge you to begin the healing work of forgiveness.

Close in prayer.

Step 5: Forgive and Let It Go

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

—JEREMIAH 29:11

It is only through knowing God, through his Son, Jesus Christ, that complete healing can take place. It is also in accepting God’s love and forgiveness that we are able to ultimately forgive our offender(s). The purpose of this session is to help you begin to resolve your questions and doubts, and come to a fuller understanding of who God is and of his great love for you. It is my hope that through this, you will reach a place where you can freely forgive.

Group leaders: This session will be a challenging one for group members. Understand every member is at a different place in their journey, and it may not be that all members trust or even believe in God’s love and forgiveness for them, much less are ready to extend forgiveness toward their abuser(s). This step will happen in stages, over time. Go into the discussion questions with that understanding, and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide your words.

Group members: In preparation for this session group members should have read chapters six and seven and have completed the Journey Essentials for each chapter prior to coming to group. Each member

should be prepared to share her takeaways from these chapters and where she is at in her journey to forgive.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Of the Scripture passages in the Journey Essentials for these chapters, which ones resonated with you the most?
2. Have you ever asked the question, “Where was God?”
3. After reading chapter six, do you believe God’s plans for you are good?
4. Would you say that you have accepted God’s love and forgiveness for you through his Son, Jesus Christ?
5. Given the biblical meaning of forgiveness, have you forgiven your offender(s)?
6. Were you able to identify the real source of your anger or resentment?
7. What are your plans to resolve those emotions so that you can ultimately forgive?

Group member homework: For the next group session, you will need to read chapter eight and complete the Journey Essentials for that chapter. Allow yourself the quiet time to read and process the applications involved. This chapter will lead you to discover your true identity in Jesus Christ, and help you begin to dismantle some of the false beliefs you’ve had about yourself up to this point.

Close in prayer.

Step 6: Discover Your True Identity

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*

—PSALM 139:13–14

As victims of abuse we can lose our sense of identity and struggle with deep insecurities that wreak havoc in every area of our lives. Feelings of worthlessness and a lack of understanding of who we are can keep us from embracing the abundant life God created us to live. In order to heal, we need to discover who we are in Jesus Christ and allow these truths to shape our identities as we journey ahead.

Group leader: Dismantling a false belief system takes time. Every group member will respond to the truths shared in this chapter differently, and at their own pace. Keep that in mind as you lead the group discussion.

Group member: In preparation for this session, group members should have read chapter eight and completed the Journey Essentials for that chapter. Each member should be prepared to share her takeaways and discoveries with the group.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Among the five Scripture passages provided in the Journey Essentials in chapter eight, which ones resonated with you the most, and why?
2. What were some of your favorite takeaways and discoveries from this chapter?
3. In what way have you allowed your story of abuse to define who you are?
4. Would you say you have “bought into the lie of worthlessness”? Explain.
5. In what ways can you already see God reshaping your identity ?
6. Do you believe in your heart that you are worth dying for?
7. In what ways have the seven “I Am” statements been helpful to you?

Group member homework: For the next group session, you will need to read chapters nine and ten and complete the Journey Essentials for each chapter. Allow yourself the quiet time to read and process the applications involved. These chapters will help you begin to process any fears concerning intimacy, and begin to live the life of wholeness God has for you.

Close in prayer.

Step 7: Establish Your New Life in Christ

*Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.*

—ISAIAH 43:18–19

Dear friends, we cannot change what has taken place in our past, but we can choose how we will live our lives today. Abuse and brokenness may be how our stories began, but they do not have to be the legacy we leave behind. From here, we can build on what God has done for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. We can turn from our old ways and set our hearts on his ways by making Christ the cornerstone of our lives, forgetting what is in the past, and determining to set our minds and hearts on the journey of faith ahead. In doing so, even our most intimate relationships will benefit because healing happens when we place our hope in Jesus Christ.

Group leader: Since you will be covering two heavy chapters in this last group session, allow additional time for this particular meeting. Depending on the personality of the group, the questions on intimacy may ignite healing conversations that need to take place for certain group members.

Group members: In preparation for this session, group members should have read chapters nine and ten and completed the Journey Essentials at the end of chapter nine. Each group member should be prepared to share her takeaways from these two chapters, and what she feels God is speaking to her heart as she moves forward in her journey ahead.

Open in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are some of the key takeaways you have gleaned from these two chapters?
2. Among the Scripture passages in your Journey Essentials for these chapters, which ones resonated with you the most, and why?
3. What patterns of sin do you see at work in your life today?
4. What steps are you taking to break these patterns?
5. In what ways are you “building on the firm foundation” of Christ, as described in chapter nine, on pages 125–133? What are some areas you still need to work on?
6. In regards to chapter ten, what are some areas you have struggled with concerning intimacy, and why?
7. From the “Five Key Principles to Cultivating Intimacy” in chapter ten, on pages 147–155, what are some principles you currently identify with and which ones do you need to adopt?

Close in prayer.

About the Author

Crystal Sutherland is a full-time writer, speaker, and artist, sharing God's message of hope and healing for hurting women. She holds an MA in theological studies from Liberty University and has spent eighteen years in ministry mentoring youth, leading worship, teaching Bible studies, and directing women's ministry. Her passion is encouraging women to find hope and healing through faith in Jesus Christ.

Crystal and her husband, Wes, live with their youngest child, Isaac, in Wilmington, North Carolina. You can reach out to her online at www.crystalsutherland.org.