

Unraveled *roots*

Chapter 2: The Root of Abandonment

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Unraveled Roots: Exposing the Hidden Causes of Damaging Behaviors

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Unless otherwise indicated, all names of people in the stories and examples in this book have been changed. Stories are based on interviews and correspondence with the authors. Specific, identifying details and circumstances have been altered to protect their identities and/or the identities of others referenced in their stories. Accounts have not been verified and are based on the remembrances and perspectives expressed by the persons interviewed.

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Chapter Two

The Root of Abandonment

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

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

However, the opposite is also true. When that bond is damaged, unhealthy, or non-existent, we can often unconsciously carry the effects of that void into adulthood. The fruit of the root of abandonment—and



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the low self-worth that frequently results—can be a reluctance to commit to relationships because of fear of rejection. Or, we may find ourselves engaging in unhealthy attachments and behaviors in order to numb the pain and fill the internal or external sense of emptiness and loss.

The absence of a caretaker

When we think of abandonment, a physical absence is usually what comes to mind. One of the definitions of “abandon,” according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “to withdraw protection, support, or help from.”² The withdrawal of the physical presence of a parent can happen as a result of a divorce. A parent walks out on the family. In some cases, the relationship ceases right then and there. We have little or no contact from that day forward. In other cases, a connection still exists, but it is sporadic, undependable, or conditional based on the parent’s whims or on our behavior. Maybe a close bond remains intact. However, nothing can change the fact that the parent’s physical presence is no longer in the home. Even if a marriage or parent relationship ends because of verbal or physical abuse and the break is necessary and beneficial, it does not change the fact that the void of a parent is still deeply felt.

Knowing we’re loved
in our heads and
feeling we’re loved
in our hearts are two
very different things.



Perhaps one or both parents never walked *in*. We may have grown up in a single parent household and never had any relationship with the other parent. For a variety of reasons, others of us grew up in adoptive homes or in foster care. Some of us lost a

parent during our childhood due to a tragic accident or disease or the result of substance abuse or other damaging behaviors. Regardless of the reason or who stepped in after the abandonment, the emptiness, feelings, and loss of attachment are the same. We crave the love and stability we were designed to have as an anchor. We need to acknowledge this loss. The remaining parent or caregiver may have done the very best he or she could. However, it often simply isn’t enough to compensate for the love and stability we needed and were designed to have so we could grow and thrive in every area of our lives.

Alone in the forest

Have you ever been in a crowd of people and felt lonely? Misunderstood? Or simply invisible? We all have at one time or another. But perhaps some

of us felt that for most of our childhood. Parents or other caregivers were physically present. Our basic needs for food and shelter were met. They may have told us they loved us, showed up for events, and even helped us go to college. By all external appearances, they were “good” parents. Yet, despite all that, we didn’t feel emotionally *connected*. We didn’t feel loved.

From our experience, we’ve seen this result for a number of reasons, including:

- We felt our feelings, needs, opinions, or accomplishments weren’t acceptable, recognized, or valued.
- Home didn’t feel like a safe place to push boundaries or make mistakes.
- We experienced verbal or emotional abuse. The parent(s) might have withheld love, affection, or approval. Or perhaps we were held to unwavering, impossible expectations that we could never meet no matter how hard we tried. We may have had an overall sense of parental disappointment in who we are as a person.
- We suffered physical and/or sexual abuse.
- We were raised by a parent or caregiver who struggled with mental health issues like depression.
- We were raised by a parent who had an addiction such as alcohol or gambling.

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

Unravel the Root

Michelle's Truth Story

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

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

State the Facts.

Michelle came for therapy only when she ran out of other options. She simply couldn't continue with her current lifestyle any longer. If she did, she would likely die. Since her teens, Michelle had been deeply involved in drugs and other dangerous behaviors. Broken, but brilliant, Michelle was perplexed about why she had made such a mess of her life. She told her counselor that she came from the "perfect family." They lived in a comfortable suburban neighborhood. She had a nice house. Her parents attended every school activity and sporting event. They went on great vacations to exciting places. All of her siblings were successful. But she was a train wreck. She never fit that "perfect" mold.

As the counselor began to dig deeper, some startling facts began to emerge. Michelle revealed that her mom and dad lived in separate parts of the house. Her dad relied heavily on prescription pain medications to treat a variety of medical conditions. She always thought he was simply doing what he had to do in order to cope. The emotional divide between her parents was something she had accepted as normal. That same physical and emotional divide existed in her own relationship with her parents. They never sat down together for meals. She spent a lot of time alone after school. Her dad couldn't work, so

her mom supported the family financially and worked constantly. In pain and depressed, her dad often isolated himself in his room for long periods of time. Their interactions were often strained and he was easily irritated and impatient with Michelle. As she talked with her counselor, Michelle began to recognize that her father was an addict. She realized that feeding his addiction always took priority over his family.

She also began to grasp the fact that because her mom was not receiving the love and connection she craved from her husband (Michelle's dad), she turned to work to fill her need for value, bonding, and approval. Her mom spent long hours trying to please people outside of the house and was not worrying about what was happening inside of the home.

Michelle also experienced sexual abuse as a child. She didn't feel safe or comfortable talking to her parents about it because they weren't emotionally available. She didn't understand that at the time. Instead, she buried her pain and searched for emotional connection by engaging in a series of very unhealthy relationships throughout her life. Finally, as a teenager, she met a guy who offered her a way out of the discontentment she was feeling at home. She moved in with him and began her descent into drugs and alcohol. She thought he loved her, but he only wanted to use her.

The root of abandonment was woven all through Michelle's childhood, but she didn't recognize it because everybody went to bed in the same house every night. However, her inability to identify the root didn't make it any less real or damaging.

So why didn't her siblings make the same damaging choices that she did? We are all created so uniquely. As a result, children in the same family can react to the same circumstances very differently. Through therapy, Michelle realized that her siblings were also affected by the abandonment, but because of their temperaments, they coped in different ways that may have been less obvious and damaging than hers.

Let's review: From the outside, Michelle's home life growing up appeared stable. Her parents attended all of her activities. They went on vacations together. However, there was an emotional divide between Michelle and

her parents. Her father was addicted to pain pills. Her mother was always working to support the family. She felt alone and unimportant.

Let's reflect: What facts of your life are similar to Michelle's?

What facts of your life are different?

In what ways can you relate to her experience?

Expose the Lie.

Now let's look at the story that Michelle wove around her facts: "We have this perfect family. We go on vacations together. They've been to every one of my games. Why didn't I turn out like my siblings? There's something wrong with *me*. I'm the black sheep."

Let's reflect: What was the story *you* wove around the facts of your childhood?

Acknowledge the Behavior.

Michelle looked to men who didn't love her in order to feel emotional connectedness. She turned to drugs, sex, and alcohol to numb the pain of not feeling loved and valued by her parents. She chased the "rush" of a new man, drug, or experience, but each one was just a temporary "fix." It didn't last. She was disappointed time and again, perpetuating and further deepening the emotional wound of abandonment.

Let's reflect: What damaging behaviors are you choosing to fill the void? (Examples: drugs, alcohol, manipulation, need for control, approval-seeking)

Embrace the Truth.

Through counseling, Michelle was able to begin to connect some dots in her family history. Michelle's paternal grandparents were divorced when her father was a child. When Michelle's grandfather left the marriage, he emotionally disconnected from his son. The grandfather was physically present for visits, but kept an emotional distance from Michelle's father and the other siblings, maybe to ease his own pain. Michelle began to realize that her father didn't know how to connect with her because he didn't have that connection with his own father growing up.

Her maternal grandparents also had a difficult relationship. Her grandfather was an alcoholic who could rarely hold down a job for more than a few months at a time. Her grandmother was the one who kept the household going financially and emotionally. That model was handed down to her mother, who repeated it in her own household, especially as her father's medical problems and addiction intensified.

Let's reflect: After reading this chapter and Michelle's story, what roots of abandonment, if any, do you recognize in your family history?

As you consider your parents' upbringing, how does it change your attitude toward them?

Through this new understanding of her family history, and intentional commitment to her healing, Michelle began to reject the lie that there is something wrong with who she is. She gradually began to believe that she is valuable and created for a purpose. There is a plan for her life. Her parents didn't abandon her because she wasn't valuable. It was a result of their own problems, baggage, and woundedness. She was able to see that her behaviors and choices were unhealthy, damaging and led her to chase the exact opposite of what she craved: love, stability, and connection.

Let's reflect: Through the healing process, Michelle identified the root, lie, and truth of her story. In the columns below, write the root, lie, and truth of your story of abandonment.

ROOT	LIE	TRUTH
<i>Michelle was emotionally abandoned by her parents, due to their own issues of addiction and unavailability.</i>	<i>Michelle believed she had a perfect family. Michelle believed she was not as good as her siblings. There was something wrong with her.</i>	<i>Michelle's parents didn't abandon her because of lack of value. Michelle does have value.</i>

Change your Choices.

You may have heard the phrase, “the truth will set you free.” Now that you have greater insight regarding the truth about you and your story, you can make different choices. The root of abandonment may have poisoned your life, but you can choose to treat it. You can interrupt that cycle of dysfunction.

Let’s reflect: What habits and behaviors stemming from abandonment do you need and want to change?

How are you going to respond differently when something triggers those feelings of loss or emptiness? (Example: *When I’m feeling sad or lonely, I turn to alcohol or a boyfriend to make me feel good about myself. Instead, I am going to reach out to a supportive friend or do a productive activity that I enjoy.*)

Choosing to Connect

As we've said before, the goal of this book is not to lay blame. Our parents modeled what they knew and reacted out of what they experienced in their own personal "Truth Stories." However, clearly, they may have often valued their needs, wants, and desires above ours. That is their *choice* and we're *not* letting them off the hook for that. But as we better understand the underlying roots of their choices and behaviors, as well as our own, it can help increase our compassion and forgiveness for them. And that is an important part of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. It is freeing to know that we can choose to move forward and start a new chapter in our story regardless of whether they ever acknowledge or express remorse for their behavior in our past chapters.

No matter what the root of abandonment looked like for us, we often tell ourselves similar lies: We are not loved. We are not good enough. We are never going to measure up. Nobody is ever going to love us or want us. We are not worthy.

But now we know the truth: We *are* valuable. Our lives *do* matter. We *do* have purpose. We *are* worthy of love.

As we choose to make positive steps and changes that reflect that truth, we will begin to find the connection we've always craved.



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

Psalm 27:10 (NIV)

Keep Growing!

A seed of encouragement

My parents divorced when I was so little that I don't ever remember them being together. Although a recovering addict, my father remained present and involved in my life—until I was in elementary school. Then, seemingly overnight, he relapsed and dropped off the radar. His sudden absence left a huge hole in my heart. I also struggled to feel emotionally connected to my mother, who was busy working and keeping everything afloat. I was starving for love and attention. I didn't realize it at the time, but I began to try to satisfy that hunger for affection and approval by being the “good girl.” When that didn't achieve the results I craved, I became the rebel. I found a group of fellow renegades who would accept me. Shortly after I turned 13, I also became sexually active as a way to feel loved and wanted.

As I got older, my relationship with my mother only became more strained and complicated. Determined to be free from the pain of the past, I left home in my early teens. By my late teens, I had given birth to one child and had two abortions. I didn't look back. I felt no regret. I made the choice to abort because it was the choice that seemed best at the time. I believed I had the right to make the best choice for me. I married my daughter's father, but we soon divorced. I think in some way I was trying to “fix” what I had no power to change in my relationship with my dad. I wanted to recreate that relationship, but with a different, happier ending.

I eventually got married to the man who is now my husband. But I was still repeating so many patterns of my past. They looked a little different; however, I was getting the same results. I was damaging my kids' view of themselves. I was trying to connect with them in unhealthy ways and enabling their damaging choices. I began to take a hard look at myself. *Why was I doing these things?* I began to work on my self-esteem by slowly letting go of unhealthy habits and creating better boundaries in my relationships. I was growing more confidence and acceptance for who I am. But I began to realize I couldn't continue to grow without more encouragement and support. I started attending a local church and developing a real relationship

with God. I gradually began to experience the unchanging love of God the Father who is always there for me. My heart was beginning to heal.

As I got healthier, I began working in a job that counseled women recovering from trauma. One of the most painful moments for me was when I was talking to a co-worker who was graphically describing a client's abortion experience. Suddenly, for the first time, I was struck by the devastating impact of my choice to abort. It was a turning point for me. Eventually, I went through an abortion healing experience provided by Support After Abortion, facilitated by Karin Barbito. This was another pivotal healing milestone for me. My husband attended the last group session with me and we both grieved my abortions together.

A huge motivator to keep going through the pain of healing and growing is seeing the positive effects on my marriage and children. As I make myself vulnerable, confess my mistakes and ask for their forgiveness at times, I increasingly establish new levels of intimacy with them. I am setting a healthier pattern for them to follow and pass down to their children.

—A former Support After Abortion client

Chapter Resources

1. Inge Bretherton, "The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth." *Developmental Psychology* 28, no.5 (September 1992): 759-775.
2. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "abandon," accessed January 2, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abandon>.