

Unraveled *roots*

Chapter 4: The Root of Abuse

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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 Four

The Root of Abuse

One day, a gardener plants a young fruit tree. Although tiny, it shows great promise to produce good fruit. But then a violent storm comes up. The raging wind and rain savagely bends the vulnerable little tree and snaps some of its branches. The gardener doesn't blame the *tree* for its injured condition. He recognizes that it was the *storm* that caused the damage.

For many of us, the storm of abuse swept into our lives and broke something inside of us. Sadly we may have blamed ourselves:

I felt I was worth nothing so I let people treat me like nothing.

I didn't feel like I could tell anyone. I was so ashamed. I had so much fear.

For most of my life, I felt crazy and disconnected. I craved connection, but I was afraid to get close to people.

I still become panicked and feel trapped when someone asks me to do something I can't do. For years, I didn't know why.

Those are all actual quotes from women who experienced some form of childhood physical, emotional, sexual, and/or religious abuse. Do any of these statements sound like something *you* have said or thought? Have you wondered why you've always been plagued with such intense feelings of fear, isolation, and shame? So did these women.

In every case, they wondered why they felt so different and isolated from those around them. They didn't connect those feelings—and the choices that stemmed from them—to their early episodes of abuse. In fact, some of their memories were so traumatic and deeply buried that they didn't emerge

until much later in life. These women were trying to relieve pain they often couldn't identify. They didn't realize that their life choices were actually further deepening their pain. Each woman believed that something was wrong with her at the very core of her being. One woman explained it this way: "I believed I was a mistake. I believed everything about me was a mistake."

Any kind of abuse, especially in childhood, can damage our sense of who we are and rob us of our security. As we've discussed in past chapters, roots are almost always intertwined. Children who have experienced abuse have also often been affected by other factors such as abandonment, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Each factor compounds the impact. Other factors can also influence the depth of the impact on a child, including the length and severity of the abuse and the nature of the relationship between the child and the abuser.

Even if you were not the direct object of abuse, witnessing or watching the dynamics of an abusive relationship in the home can also be extremely devastating. It can increase a child's risk for long-term physical and mental health conditions.¹

Who can I trust?

Our ability to trust begins to form in childhood. We enter the world completely vulnerable. Trustworthy parents and caregivers provide our security and stability. If some of our earliest experiences were a betrayal of trust by the very people who were supposed to protect us, we struggle with our own value and how and who to trust.

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Emotional abuse can take a variety of forms, including name calling; rejection of the child's worth; bullying; isolating, and ignoring the child; and/or over-pressuring the child to behave and perform in ways that are far beyond the child's capabilities.² This form of abuse can be as much or more devastating as

physical abuse. Language and emotions are powerful. If they are used as weapons, they can critically damage how we think and feel about others and ourselves. It's through the language we hear that we form our views about ourselves. Demeaning and insulting words embed themselves in our hearts and minds. We absorb them and identify ourselves by those labels such as ugly, fat, stupid, lazy, or worthless.

Patterns of damaging interactions between parent and child can create long-term effects, including depression, suicidal thoughts, learning difficulties, low self-esteem, anxiety symptoms, poor adult health, and difficulties with social skills and relationships.³



Both emotional and physical abuse are often rooted in the need to control another person.

While emotional abuse does not always lead to physical violence, physical violence *does not* occur without emotional abuse. Experts have differing viewpoints about what defines **physical abuse**, however, according to the World Health Organization, physical abuse of a child is defined as the intentional use of physical force against a child that results in – or has a high likelihood of resulting in – harm for the child's health, survival, development, or dignity. This includes hitting, beating, kicking, shaking, biting, strangling, scalding, burning, poisoning, and suffocating. Much physical violence against children in the home is inflicted with the object of punishing.⁴

Both emotional and physical abuse are often rooted in the need to control another person. A parent who was abused as a child can often repeat those same violent tendencies. In some cases, they might not even recognize that their behavior is abusive. A father or mother who grabs and uncontrollably screams at her child is often simply repeating the pattern set by his or her parent(s). Although damaging, it seems “normal” to them because that was their childhood experience and model.

In other cases—through no fault of your own—you may have become your parent's outlet to vent his or her pent-up rage for the abuse and lack of control he or she had as a child. Or, as we saw in Rebecca's story in the last chapter, abuse as a child can cause a parent to go to the other extreme.

Rebecca's father disconnected emotionally and didn't discipline her and her siblings because he feared he would repeat his own father's abusive patterns.

We can make choices that stem from "forgotten" abuse.



How a child reacts to abuse can depend upon a variety of factors, including the child's temperament, emotional makeup, and the severity and duration of the abuse. In some cases, the child blames himself or herself for the abuse.

They believe if they just behaved better or tried harder, the violence or emotional abuse wouldn't have occurred: "If I didn't scream at my sister, my dad wouldn't have hit me."

Some children become incredibly withdrawn and passive. Others grow extremely angry and rebel against the parent(s) who are abusing them. Children may want to hurt their parents or harm others, so that others will feel the same kind of pain they do.

Sexual abuse is another form of physical abuse. Sexual abuse is unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats, or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent.⁵ So often, victims of sexual abuse feel shame. They may feel they invited it somehow. The body's sexual response can be involuntary at times. The body can enjoy and respond to certain sensations, even when the mind and emotions are repulsed and traumatized by it.

"As a child, I was verbally abused by my dad. My mom didn't protect me. Then, my older brother began to show me inappropriate affection—fondling and other inappropriate touching. Even though I knew it was wrong, I was so damaged and hungry for love and acceptance that a part of me enjoyed it. I finally felt loved. It filled a void and a deep need in me."

—Rhonda, sexual abuse survivor

Often there is dissociation from the abuse. The mind protects us from things that are too painful for us to process emotionally. While the mind may block it from our present conscious memory, we can still unconsciously be making choices that stem from that "forgotten" abuse.

Seeds of trust

We've covered the more obvious kinds of abuse: physical, sexual, and emotional. Although often less acknowledged and discussed, experiencing religious abuse as a child can also be devastating. We were designed to have a healthy, loving relationship with God. Unfortunately, sometimes parents and others can manipulate, shame, control, and intimidate us by using a false or distorted view of God and religion. They may use religion as a justification for abusive behaviors. This is not limited to a specific religion or denomination.



Abuse, regardless of its form, chips away at our identity and security.

What is religious abuse? In our experience, the following characteristics are often present:

- The child is not allowed to question the family's beliefs and behaviors.
- The child is forced to isolate from others who do not share the parent's family's beliefs (an "us" vs. "them" mentality).
- The child is forced, manipulated, or subjected to abusive behaviors in the name of religion, often using fear, guilt, and shame.

In addition, profound confusion can occur if you grew up being taught religious values that were very different from how your parents behaved. This mixed message, or example of hypocrisy, can cause you to feel distant, resentful, or angry toward God or your faith.

"My father always had a prominent role in the church, but behind closed doors, he was an angry, intimidating, brutal man. My fear of him continued throughout my life. My view of God was difficult to separate from my experiences with my parents. This abuse and insecurity has caused lack of trust and isolation. The roots of abuse ran through all

areas of my life. Over the years, it brought much emotional pain.

Growing up, I was incredibly insecure about my appearance and identity. When puberty hit, I became extremely busty. Instead of making me feel more confident, it made me feel even more uncomfortable about how I looked. It also opened the door for more abuse. My parents raised money for (religious) charities by standing outside businesses, asking for donations. Sometimes they would send me into bars to use my ‘assets’ to get money from drunken men. I wasn’t more than 11 or 12 years old. They were driven to raise money, not by compassion, but for the awards and recognition they would get from the community.

Eventually, I discovered God to be very different than what had been portrayed to me growing up. My ongoing healing came through reading, Christian retreats, counseling and eventually attending seminary. God also provided amazing resources and highly qualified, discerning people to walk with me on my healing journey. I am also thankful for medication and advancements in medical science’s understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”

—Marie, religious and sexual abuse survivor

Abuse, regardless of its form, chips away at our identity and security. These are the building blocks necessary to make healthy, life-giving choices.



How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take
refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 36:7 (NIV)

Chapter Resources

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