

# FINDING YOUR



(Survivor's Workbook #2)

by

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## Introduction

This workbook is a follow-up to *Rising from the Storm*. It is written under the assumption that any journey of hope and healing moves a person from abnormal to normal: abuse to peace, being exploited to a healthy interaction with others, being enslaved to freedom, being raped out of lust to being embraced out of love, etc.

If all you have ever known is life under the thumb of very dark people, you have not a clue what it means to live free and in the light. What is beauty? What is love? What is a normal daily routine? What is the normal way to express human emotion? This series of sessions is an exploration of “normal” ... a “normal” that is more than just a setting on your washer and dryer.

Some of these sessions will miss the mark with your personal profile, but other times sessions will feel spot on to you. However, if you stick with it, we hope you will begin to discover your “new normal.”

If you did work your way through *Rising from the Storm*, you already know walking into hope, healing is not easy, and it sometimes feels rather jerky. You take two steps forward only to take three backward steps. You relapse into dark and hurtful habits. Your thoughts and emotions fall back into unhealthy patterns. It is almost as if you are back in the storm, only this time, you are not drowning. You are wearing a life jacket in a small boat. You are discovering that the power of light, love and hope are stronger than the stormy powers of darkness. So keep telling yourself ... stay in the boat.

*And whatever you do, don't take off your life-jacket.*

## Session One

### What is “normal”

How do you live a normal life? Nothing in your prior life was normal. Back in those torturous days, you assumed yours was the life everybody lived. Now you know; it was not how everyone else lived and definitely, not what TV sitcoms are made of. It was messed up. You do not want to go back to that ever. So here you sit between the dark evil days gone by and a future that scares the crap out of you. How do you live a normal life today?

Therefore, you will know what you are getting into, this first session is going to outline the path the rest of this book will take.

Emotions: You have been bent and broken on the inside, over and over and over again. When you cried, you were beaten instead of hugged. When you needed to feel love, you were violated instead of cared for. When you showed generosity, you were punished instead of appreciated. Early on, every time you expressed normal emotions, you were treated as if they were horrid and unacceptable. How are you supposed to know how to experience or express your feelings in a normal way?

Beauty: That which is wicked and ugly was literally shoved down your throat and you were told it was beautiful. Scars and bruises, the consequences of brutality, were covered with “beautiful” clothing, makeup and tattoos. Because of your abuse, vivid colors and sounds and smells, intended by God to enhance life, have become paralyzing triggers.

Relationships: What is a normal relationship? Does it always have to be sexual? Is there such a thing as relating to another person without threats or violence? Do you have to hit first to keep from being hit? Aren't all people dangerous? Can you get your point across without yelling? Can you question someone without arguing? Can you share your thoughts and desires without being punished?

Routine: You can now choose when to get up? You can decide whether to eat chocolate or vanilla? You can brush your teeth, get dressed, get in your car and drive to a job where they do not beat or rape you? You are free to clean your house if it gets too messy. Your money is actually your money? You can invest it or give it away. You can learn to care for yourself.

God: Who is God? Who made him boss? Why should you care? If he's real, why didn't he show up and help you when you were being raped and beaten? And if he's so good, why did so many of his “church people” use and abuse you back in the day? Why do people make such a big thing out of God when you cannot even see or hear him? In your case, by all rights, you should feel like you are on your own against the world.

Yourself: For most of your life other people told you who you were, and it wasn't pretty. “You're a piece of dirt.” “I can do anything to you I want ... you're helpless.” “The only thing you're good for is tak'n it in the hind end.” Will you ever be able to discover who you really are? Are you worth more than your sexuality? Do you have something to offer the world?

Trust: If your experience on this planet has taught you anything, it's that you should NEVER



## Session Two

### Normal Emotions (negative)

Emotions are NOT good or bad. They are simply gauges that tell you what condition you're in, like the thermometer in your refrigerator that tells if your food is being kept cool enough not to spoil. No use fighting, demonizing or trying to change your feelings. They are what they are. The best thing you can do is explore them by asking questions.

This session is called “negative” emotions to distinguish it from more positive emotions like happiness or contentment. But the word negative does NOT mean these emotions are bad or evil.

Normal anger is just ramped up disappointment. We have certain expectations of how life is supposed to unfold. We expect good behavior to be rewarded. We expect people not to hurt or threaten each other. People ought to do what they say they will do. We expect this. When life turns out otherwise, we are disappointed. And sometimes, that disappointment stews until it boils up into anger. This is normal.

Abnormal anger is anger that turns to rage and starts throwing things. It does damage. It seeks revenge. It broods and hides and lays low until one day it picks up a weapon to hurt someone. Abnormal anger thinks everybody is out to get you. It comes equipped with a hair trigger, and wants to shoot down anyone who even looks like a threat. Anger this intense needs to be explored. Where does it come from? Why do you cling to it?

Normal guilt is natural regret aimed inwardly. We all mess up, and sometimes our mess-ups negatively impact other people. Nobody in the history of humanity has ever figured out how to totally prevent this. Life happens. And more often than you'd prefer, you're the author of it.

Abnormal guilt turns into shame. You don't just feel guilty for what you've done, you feel ashamed of who you are. It's as if you need to apologize for existing every time you walk into a room. Your abusers made you feel like dirt and it stuck. In your mind, everywhere you go people avoid you or hide their faces from you. This needs to be talked about so it can be healed. Shame is NOT normal.

Normal fear is a very good thing. It helps you avoid angry dogs and coiled rattlesnakes. Fear in reasonable doses can save your life and the lives of others. You had to be tough in your past life. Showing fear was a sign of weakness. That is a lie. Fear is a sign of common sense.

Abnormal fear is paranoia. Life itself becomes one giant threat: sudden loud noises, strangers entering the room, cars with tinted windows. ---- Or you may be sitting there thinking, I may have triggers that make me duck or run for the nearest exit, but I no longer know what it means to feel fear. A bad diagnosis at the doctor's office doesn't scare me. A neighbor threatening me with bodily harm is no big deal. Either extreme (paranoia or being numb to fear) is unhealthy. Talk about it. Dig into it. You have a normal version of fear in you. Find it.

Normal discouragement is as predictable as the rising sun. Count on it. It will make an appearance. Plan and work as hard as you can, life rarely cooperates with even your best

efforts. It's hard. It's heavy. And it can get discouraging. Normal.

Depression is something else altogether. It doesn't come and go. It comes and stays, saturating every corner of your life with a dark ooze that is impossible to shed. It robs you of purpose, joy, peace and hope. It sucks the life out of you. It demands your focus. It ruins everything. You can't get out of bed in the morning. You contemplate suicide. Not normal. Immediately find a counselor or trusted friend with whom you can talk about this.

Things to consider (combine some of these if it works for you):

1. Describe what you thought normal anger, guilt and fear were before you started working on your healing.

2. Has your thinking changed on these as you have been in the healing process? If so, describe.

3. If you have dealt with depression, how would you describe it?

## Session Three

### Normal Emotions (positive)

It's okay to feel good. Tell yourself this at least 10 times a day. They tried to beat and rape normal good feelings out of you back in the day. You were only allowed to feel good on their terms. In fact to allow you to feel good was out of the question. No way could they allow you to experience even a sliver of what it meant to be human.

Well, now you face an open road, free to explore all that it means to be human. Like we said in the last session, this means you can explore normal “negative” (not evil) emotions. It also means you can explore “positive” feelings.

Hope: It is okay to hope, to anticipate, and to imagine what a good and healthy future might look like. Think back. Your hopes were centered around “I hope I just get a light beating instead of a near-death one.” “Maybe today I can eat an entire sandwich instead of a few cracker crumbs.”

But there is a catch. Hope gone wild, with no restraint, can lead to all kinds of trouble. Take the sandwich. Now that you have some freedom, why not let 'er rip? Shoot, why eat one sandwich. Eat two ... or five? Now that you have a little money, why not just go wild and buy whatever you want? Reasonably happy is normal. Supremely happy is impossible.

Happiness: Back when life was NOT good, how would you describe a happy day? Did you have many? Did you have any? Can you count them on one hand? There is a lot in this world that can and will make you happy if you let it: the smile of a child, the generosity of a senior citizen, the song of a bird or splendor of a sunset. Those fresh realizations that happen now and then that you are free ... these produce happiness. This is a very good thing.

But, like we were saying. There is reasonable happiness and then there is supreme happiness. Reasonable - good. Supreme - dangerous. Pain is inevitable. Life happens. So we catch bits and pieces of happiness here and there. This is reasonable. To try and avoid all pain and discomfort, at least in this world, is a vain attempt to create supreme happiness. This will never work and will only produce frustration, anger and disappointment.

Peace is a deep, deep emotion. It is the condition of your heart. Back in your days of abuse peace was a word you probably never even thought of. In fact, your abusers did everything in their power to rob you of it.

Peace is a feeling of security, safety, well-being. Peace is contented, but not lazy. Life may be stormy on the outside, but inside, you know who you are. You know you are loved. You know you are cared for. You know that the part of you that really counts (your spirit) cannot be touched because it is in very good and trustworthy hands. (We'll talk more about this later.)

Given what you lived in for so many years, don't kick yourself if you don't “get” this session. In that dark world, hope, happiness and peace were for the weak. You had to be strong to survive. This session may come across as emotional cotton candy. It may leave a strange taste in your mouth at first, but do not spit them out. Let it linger. Let it work its magic. In time,

you will get it.

It is okay for life not to suck. It is okay to celebrate. It is okay to smile. It is okay to breathe a sigh of relief. It is okay to lean back and soak it all in.

Things to consider:

1. What does the word “hope” mean to you?

2. What does the word “happy” mean to you?

3. What does the word “peace” mean to you?

## Session Four

### Normal Beauty

We talked about this in our first workbook *Rising from the Storm*, except from a slightly different angle. Evil cannot exist on it's own. Goodness gives. Evil takes. Evil, minus anything good is forced to take from itself until it consumes itself. In order to survive, it has to become a parasite attached to good. If evil walked up to your door, you would turn it away every time. In order to gain entrance into your life, it first has to dress itself up in beauty.

Your life of abuse has forced evil down your throat disguised as a thing of beauty (oft times literally). You were told you were beautiful only if you were satisfying the selfish desires of your abusers. Your treatment was so ugly, that being beaten with fewer blows than usual was mistaken as beauty by you. Imagine that; abuse-times-ten is ugly, which came to mean abuse-times-three is beautiful?

It's time you walk away from the false definition of beauty you've been force-fed and discover "normal beauty."

Let's start with your five senses. Beauty's smell draws you in for a deeper breath, instead of turning away and holding your nose. Beauty's sound pulls you in and makes you want to sing and dance, instead of run or fight back. Beauty's taste goes down easy and makes you want another bite, instead of gagging or vomiting. Beauty's touch makes you feel safe and secure, instead of dreading what comes next. Beauty's sight captures your imagination so you can't look away, instead of burning painful mental images you'll never be able to forget.

Beauty is what you started your life with, the essential, true version of yourself. You may not be able to remember those days. But God does. He's furious about how evil has tried to disfigure you. That will not float with him. One of his greatest dreams for you is to re-discover your original beauty that which he gave to you back at conception. It does not matter who provided the sperm or the egg, every life is beautiful at its beginning, 'cause God does not do ugly.

Imagine an innocent child sitting on the front porch with a paper and pen. They are writing the story of your life. But the story goes beyond your scars and brands. The child writes about the deep, deep beauty God placed in you. It's there. Evil did it's best to take it away. But evil failed. So let the child write. If they run out of things to write today, let them come back tomorrow and write more until you catch a glimpse of your soul, and there you will begin to discover what we mean when we talk about "normal beauty."

As you are considering beauty during your week spent on this session, try to get outdoors. Feel the sun on your face. If it's raining, feel the wetness. Let the breezes surround you. Listen for a bird's song. Try to hear the call of the cricket or the summer cicada. Pick up some garden dirt and sift it through your fingers. Skip a rock across a pond. Watch how the water eventually accepts it in the end and then thanks you with its ripples. There is a very un-complex, un-hypocritical beauty in nature. Take it all in as if it was your first time. Unpolluted nature equals "normal beauty."

Granted lions eat zebras and beetles kill pine trees, but this is the normal cycle of life. It is not abuse. It is not deceptive. It does not calculate or exploit. In its own way this cycle can actually be beautiful, because it teaches all of us our “normal” place in the universe.

Things to consider:

1. Is a sunset beautiful to you, or does it trigger dread that the night is coming? Write it out.

2. Go through all five of your senses. My favorite color is. My favorite sound is, etc. Then, to the best of your ability, explain why.

3. How do you feel about finding your beauty through an innocent child's story?

## Session Five

### Abnormal Relationships (toxic)

Chronic and extreme abuse always stems from toxic people. You were not the toxic one. Your abusers were. But over time you may have gotten so used to their toxicity, it came to feel normal. If you got slapped on the face every time you were offered life-saving food, slaps might have become something you looked forward to. This is NOT normal. Just say'n.

Now that you are exploring a “new normal,” let's take a look at four types of people who are guaranteed to harm, not heal, you.

**Seductive people study you.** They learn your likes and dislikes. They spy on your life until they compile a list of your strengths and weakness. They know your triggers. They read you like a book. You get their full attention, not because they want to help you. They want to use what they know about you to seduce you into their web.

If you are attracted to wealth, they use money. If you medicate, they will present you with your drug of choice. If you like attention, they treat you like royalty. If you have food issues, they keep pizza delivery on speed dial. They will work whatever works on you to get you to do what they want you to do. They will scratch your back all day long, if you give them what they want.

**Bullies dominate you.** In their eyes, might makes right. It goes back to the cave man. You do what I say because I am stronger and carry a bigger club. They have perfected the art of inflicting pain to the point where even their threats work. They have more money. They have sidekicks to do their dirty work. They have techniques they have perfected against the weak.

To them, you are not even human. You are a dog to lick their boots, a jackass to pull their wagon, a slave to carry out their will. They may offer you a place at their table if you play along, but they will never value or respect you or see you for who you really are.

**Deceptive people try to trick you.** To them you are an easy mark, too stupid to figure out you are being conned. They are convinced their ability to lie is far superior to your ability to figure out the truth. They con you into doing their work, and then take credit for it. They make it look like their mistakes are your fault. They promise you gold and give you gravel.

They tell you lies about yourself; how other people feel about you. They say life is one way when it's the exact opposite. They may even throw around the name of God, as if he's signed on to their plans. But all they're doing is trying to get you on board with their latest scheme.

**Energy suckers will drain the life out of you.** They demand your time, your money, your undivided attention. They take, never give. If they do give, they expect payback; only double. They use any excuse available to pull you into their needy world. It's like they can't get by without you; your opinion, your input, your permission. They do not love you, only what you can do for them.

All these types of toxic people are dangerous. Do not let them use you. Love them from a



## Session Six

### Normal Relationships (healthy)

In our last session, we talked about toxic relationships. If you are in one long enough, it can actually come to feel normal. But that version of “normal” only destroys you. Not good. How about we spend some time talking about healthy relationships; relationships that empower, encourage and enhance you.

What does it mean to be empowered? It felt like the people who abused you had power. Were they empowered? If so, you probably do not really want to be empowered. But this isn't where we're headed in this session.

God had something very beautiful and solid in mind when he made you. Life has tried to scar and deface your beauty. It has taken that which was solid and attempted to shred it with violence and disrespect. A healthy version of empowerment would be to rediscover the beauty and solidity God created in you way back at your conception.

There are people in the world who are actually eager to help you do this. They want to walk along side you, to listen to your story, to share meals with you and spend late evenings just getting to know you. No hidden agenda. They just value and respect you. These are the same people who will help you rediscover who you really are at your core. And once this happens, they will call out the true you, give you life and help you gain footing and function in the world.

What does it mean to be encouraged? Encouragement may be as simple as cheering someone up. Some days that in itself is a game-changer. But it goes much deeper. Once you discover the real you (the core you), you have a choice. Do I give this real version of myself a chance, or am I too worn out to try? Do I explore what can be, or do I settle for what's always been?

Thankfully, you don't have to face this solo. There are people (probably the same ones who want to empower you) who want to supply the energy boost you need to take your first self-exploratory steps. When you run out of “want-to,” they will share some of theirs. When you are tempted to give up, they will lend you a hand. They will not just listen. They will motivate.

What does it mean to be enhanced? Beef stew has all kinds of nutritional value, but the eating of it is enhanced with a few dashes of salt and pepper. It goes from just nutritional to beautiful. Then there are cupcakes that are “enhanced” by adding sprinkles. The beauty is only on the surface, it never saturates the insides.

The person who will best enhance your life will speak to your inner beauty and solidity. They will go far beyond helping you discover it. They will offer wise words and helpful activities that bring out your full “flavor.” They will invite you to be you with all your might. They might challenge you. They might correct you. But it will be for your good, not theirs. And when the dust settles, you will always find yourself in a better place than before.



## Session Seven

### Normal Work Routine

You used to be under the domination of a pimp, trafficker or abusive “other.” When it suited their purposes, they fed you, bought you clothes, gave you a place to sleep and shelter. You were allowed to make very few choices on your own. They kept you on a short leash, figuratively and literally. And when it sounded like they were giving you a choice, they were actually setting you up for failure or punishment.

So now you're faced with options: where to work, how hard to work when you get there, how early or late to arrive. Should you seek training? College? Tech school? Should you walk to work, take the bus or buy a car? Should you carry your lunch, eat in the cafeteria or order out? Should you allow yourself to get close to the people where you work? You are allowed to make choices, even bad ones.

How do you figure out the difference between a reasonable request from your boss and an abusive disrespectful one? What is a fair salary for what you are doing? What are normal work hours? Does your boss complimenting your appearance mean he wants to have sex, or is he simply a nice person with no hidden agenda?

How can you earn a living without feeling like you're being taken for granted? How can you work with and for people who remind you of the pimps and Johns from your past? What are you supposed to do when your job calls on you to encounter people, places and situations that trigger you?

This calls for careful patience. Just tell yourself this whole getting-out- in-public thing is going to take getting used to. You will mess up. Those you live and work with will mess up. Know this for sure.

Two things you need to keep telling yourself ...

1. You need to recognize and develop reasonable expectations. Stop expecting that everybody is out to hurt you and start telling yourself that most people are doing the best they can. Stop expecting that you will get it right the first time. Stop expecting others to make your choices for you and start making some on your own, even though you mess up. (Do not take the opposite extreme and expect everyone to be good. This can be equally dangerous.)
2. Tell yourself, it's not always about you. Not every disaster or mistake is your fault. Not every whispered conversation is about you. Not every group project will succeed or fail because of you. You are part of something bigger. You are among others who are investing time and energy where you work. You are not responsible for the growth and welfare of the business. You are only responsible to be the best version of yourself at that business.

On a more moment-to-moment level, gradually draw up a daily routine you can live with. How early do you have to get up to be at work on time? What does it take to get ready for the day:

coffee, breakfast, shower etc.? What is the best route to take to work? Do not hesitate to ask your superiors what is expected of you. Look to your co-workers for additional help and advice

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in this area. Find convenient and safe places to take your breaks and eat your lunch. Allow yourself time and room to get familiar with your surroundings and those you work with.

If you have a social life after hours, make sure it is one that does not rob you of sleep, energy, and hope for the future. (Do not put yourself in harm's way.) Leisure time should always help you be a healthier person. If the morning meets you with regrets from the night before, change your after-hour routine.

Daily routines can feel claustrophobic and even like a return to enslavement if you let them. But they can also create safe paths you can travel, free from fear or suspicion.

Things to consider:

1. Talk about the most intimidating thing you do each day.
2. Do you expect things to go well or poorly as you approach your daily responsibilities?
3. Does the idea of a daily routine feel boring or safe to you, or something completely different like scary, frustrating and overwhelming?

## Session Eight

### Normal Home Routine

How do you make healthy decisions when nobody is watching? (You may already have a handle on this. If you do, then suffer through this session for the good of others in the group.)

At work you are surrounded by people who, like you, are working for a common cause. If you don't know what to do next, you can ask for help or just watch. You can do the same about anywhere in public: order what the person in front of you ordered in the lunch line, pay for your bus fare like all the other riders did, find your way around the food mart by looking at the signs and fellow shoppers. What about home? You're alone, with no outside help.

How is this going to work?

For starters, your home needs to feel safe. You have spent too many years living on the edge of survival. You cannot create a Nerf world with only soft round edges, but you certainly do not need a home that makes you feel vulnerable. Make sure you have good locks on all windows and doors. Make sure it has adequate lighting, including backup (candles, lanterns and flashlights). Make sure you have free and easy access to all exits. Buy some pepper spray and keep it handy. If you are a pet lover and have not had a bad experience with them, get a dog with some bulk and a big voice. You need to feel safe in every corner of your home.

Notes are good, on the refrigerator door or maybe a dry erase board. If you are used to having somebody tell you what to do, simply become that person for yourself. If your day starts in the bathroom, leave notes in that room that direct you to the next task. If your next task is in the kitchen, leave yourself notes that help you take the next step. You get the picture.

Keep a desk area somewhere in your home. In that desk, keep bills to be paid in one place and bills that have been paid in another. Set a date each month, or every two weeks, when you pay your bills. Keep a list in that desk of pending projects that you can work on during your free time. Keep a calendar handy for medical and other appointments. Always keep your checkbook balanced, so you do not spend money you don't have.

Keep your pantry and vanity well stocked with food and necessities so you do not have to go out after dark when you might feel more vulnerable. Keep a shopping list of what you are about to run out of.

It's not a bad idea to get some money-management counseling. Budgets and savings accounts are not luxuries for the wealthy. They are simple essentials to keep you from running out of money. In most cases, the problem is NOT a shortage of money. It is a mismanagement of money. Be patient with yourself. It takes some people longer to learn to handle money.

It will take time to be alone without feeling lonely. You may want to start out with a compatible roommate. For sure, do not cut yourself off from people who have the potential to bring light



## Session Nine

### Getting Real with God

Let's clear some things up. God is NOT the same as church. People who attend church may not even know God. God is NOT the same as religion. God is NOT the same as Christians. God is NOT the same as rules and regulations. God is NOT the same as America. God is NOT the same as authority figures. (Read this paragraph a few times to let it sink in.)

A lot of your feelings and opinions about God were formed by the people and institutions listed in the first paragraph. And much of that information is high-grade deception. Straight up! So before you go any further, just know that much of what you think you know about God is not true. You were lied to.

Bishops, preachers, senators and police officers paid high dollar to rape you. Crooked judges looked the other way instead of stepping up and doing the right thing. Some of the people who wounded you most deeply claimed to be followers of God. Some even told you they were doing God's will while they were abusing you. How in the world would anyone expect you to have a healthy or normal opinion of God?

But, that doesn't mean all your feelings and opinions about God are not without reason. What you faced in your abuse almost certainly left you feeling abandoned and ignored by God. Do not apologize for that. And, if you do feel that way, don't whitewash or deny it. If you are mad at God, let him know, and you do not have to make it pretty. If you think he's a no good so and so, say so. If you have a Bible, go back and read some of David's Psalms, he may not have cursed, but he left no doubt when he felt shafted by God.

If you do not get real with God, he'll never be able to be real to you.

*"Where in the heck were you all those years when I was raped, starved and beaten? Why didn't you step in and stop it? Did you even give a know I was alive?"*

You may not love God. You may not respect him. You may wonder down deep if you should try and pursue a future with him. But at the very least, try getting real with him about your deep feelings and opinions toward him. God would much rather be cussed than ignored. He is big enough to handle your hurts, hang-ups and anger.

That last sentence may be one the first really true statements you've ever heard about God. Grab hold and go with it. See where it might take you. Money back guarantee, God will not smash you for being honest with him, no matter how hateful it sounds. And if your internal radar is turned on, you might actually feel the beginnings of a connection with him.

God wants clear air between you and him. And it starts with you being radically honest with your feelings and opinions about him. Just be warned, once you tell the truth about how you feel, God will begin to tell you the truth about how he feels about you. And you will be shocked in the most pleasant and unexpected way. As his true feelings about you become apparent, a

change will happen in you (again, money back guarantee). We will explore this more in the next two sessions.

Things to consider:

1. Even if you have done this before, write a letter to God telling him exactly how you feel about him.

2. If you can ... describe the biggest lie ever told to you about God.

3. If you were being questioned by someone who had never heard of God, how would you describe him? What does he look like to you?

## Session Ten

### Unlearning the false god

God is kinda like a belly button. Everybody has one. And just like belly buttons, no two are exactly the same. The bible says *God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow*. But that's God on his own ... minus our human experience of him. Put people in the mix and each of us has our own unique "God-story" to tell. So God is the same and yet he's not.

God gets both credit and blame for all kinds of stuff; good and bad. Children get cancer and die ... God did that. A tornado narrowly misses our house ... God did that. I get all green lights on my way to work ... God did that. My best friend got AIDS ... God did that. I am in a good mood today ... God did that. I felt like crap yesterday ... God did that. Really? Is he like some cosmic Santa Claus sitting around deciding whether to give us nice or not-so-nice gifts just because he can?

You may feel like all the bad that has happened to you in this life was from God. Or you may think somebody else did it, but God never stepped in to protect you. Or you may think God was light years away and didn't even know or care that you existed. Or you may think God was powerless; that evil is too strong for him. You may even think God hated you.

Obviously, if you and God are going to have any kind of future, there are some issues that need to be resolved. More basic, you will have to decide if you are interested in having any conversation with God at all. You may feel it's not worth it.

Let's suppose you'd like to explore a relationship with God. As you get started, you will need to unlearn some of the lies you were programmed to believe about God.

God is not a puppet master or a control freak. He does intercede in our earthly existence, but he never violates any person's right to make their own choices, not even the ones who seek to do us harm. He may directly insert himself in certain situations, but he never blocks our ability to make choices good or bad.

The fact that God does not always rescue us from harm does not mean he does not love us or has abandoned us. We live in a world full of people who make unhealthy, harmful choices every day. Then there is you, facing your own daily choices between love and hate, kindness and selfishness, sharing or hoarding. This is what makes us all human. God would violate every bit of this if he forced or even manipulated our choices. He would also violate this if he protected us from the consequences.

If any of this interests you, try sitting down and looking back over your years of trauma. Were there moments, maybe fleeting and brief, when you knew someone unseen yet very significant was keeping you alive? Were there people who showed you love for no apparent reason? Did you survive situations that should have killed you? Did you suspect that someone bigger than you had stepped in to protect you? These are your memories, so you are the only one who can make this call. But, do you suppose God may have had a hand in at least some

of this?

It's okay if that last question makes you mad. If God was sneaking around the edges, why didn't he come on in and save you from those who hurt you? That is a fair question. You need to ask it until you get the answer.

Things to consider:

1. If you were God, how would you have handled a child being hurt?
2. How do you feel about God allowing people to make harmful choices?
3. Can you talk about any times when God showed up while you were being hurt?

## Session Eleven

### Discovering the Real God

There are two non-negotiables about God. He will NEVER unlove you. He will NEVER leave you. For sure, there other things we know about him: he's all powerful, can be everywhere all the time, knows everything there is to know, is the definition of perfection. But they don't live where we live like these first two; love and presence.

God's Love: God is not waiting for you to love him first. He already loves you, even if you hate him. He even loves you if you do not believe he exists. He does not love you with an "if only" love. If only you would stop doing this or that. If only you would get your stuff together. If only you had not done what you did. There is no "if only" in his love. God loves you with all the love in the universe even if you never change, even if you never look his direction. There is nothing you can ever do or not do to make him unlove you.

His love for you is not just a tolerant love; like he loves you, but can barely tolerate your behavior or your personality. He adores you. The real you (the deep down you) makes him smile. You are one of his beloved children. His feeling toward you are not based on your lovability. They are based on his ability to love. This will NEVER change.

God's love for you is never sexual or self-serving. He always puts your welfare before his convenience. You are not some project he takes on so he can groom and train you to work for him. When God became flesh in Jesus, he got down on the floor and washed our feet. He's more interested in what he can do for you than what you can do for him.

God's Presence: When you were raped, God was there. When you were chained to a wall, God was there. When you were beaten, starved, threatened and abandoned, God was there. But he wasn't just an observer. He took the blows with you. He was violated right along with you. He cried your tears, tasted the sweat and the semen. He has never left you. And he will NEVER leave you.

God has never answered the question of why bad things happen to innocent people. He has however personally endured all the bad things we have endured along with us. He was there when you were molested, when you were (fill in the blank). And he will be until the end of time.

Do not let these last few sessions be the end of this discussion. God is interested in you whether you are interested in him or not. But if you are interested in knowing God, there is a healthy and an unhealthy way to pursue that interest.

Do not just pick up a bible and start reading. Start with the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Then read them again and again. You will never know God until you know his Son.

Do not assume that church people or folks who call themselves Christians will tell you the truth about God. Heck, be careful with ministers, priests or bishops. Let's be honest, you may have been hurt more by these kinds of people than any other types. Your past has taught you

read people. It does not matter what label they wear, if they feel dodgy, look somewhere else for wisdom and mentoring. Your best bet might be to find other abuse victims who have known God for a while. Just make sure they are real and they actually care about you.

Things to consider:

1. Write a letter, trying to convince God to unlove you.

2. Now, share what it made you feel to write that letter.

3. How do you feel about a God who became one of us; was born in a barn to an unwed teenage girl, had to run from a deadly king to save his life, hung out with hookers and winos and got executed for something he didn't do?

## Session Twelve

### Who are you?

We have been at this for a while. Here we are in session twelve of our search for a new normal. We have explored emotions, relationships, beauty, daily routines and God. Now it's time to discover the "new normal" version of you.

Abusive people, horrid circumstances, years of hopeless existence have taught you to subconsciously see a false version of yourself. Life has lied to you about you. And it has lied over and over and over. And if it ever thought you weren't listening, it just lied louder and more violently.

So to begin with, let's ask: what has life told you about yourself. You are a piece of dirt? You will never amount to anything? You can't make a decision on your own? You belong to someone else? You won't live out the year? You can't survive without drugs and alcohol? You will never hold down a job unless it involves sex? Up until now, this has been your normal.

What would a "new normal" you look like? You are pure gold. You can be whatever you want to be. You survived, which proves you can make very wise decisions when you have to. You are a slave to no one. You will live. You can cope, actually thrive without drugs and alcohol. You are gifted to do many other jobs that do not involve sex. You have been set free.

There are three steps you need to take: search, write, talk.

Search yourself. Who are you? What do you like to do? What do you want to do today; yes, this very day? Given all the time, money, education and energy you could need, what would you like to do with the rest of your life? What catches your attention and keeps it? Who are the people you want to help the most? What would you do with adequate resources?

Search yourself for your strengths and weaknesses. Know what triggers you. Search your back-story for memories that still haunt and/or control you. Go back and read your responses over these past eleven sessions. Notice the progress you have made. You are finding yourself.

Write down your thoughts and feelings. Write what you know about yourself, what you would like to do with your life. Let your mind overflow in your words. Write about your hopes and dreams. Write about your emotions, both surface and deep. Write about the people in your life who care about you. Write about your daily experiences.

You do not have to share what you write with everybody. Do not worry about grammar or spelling. You are not trying to be an author or poet. You are just putting in words who you are and who you want to be. You may rebel, saying this is silly or a waste of time. It is not. Use a journal, a computer, a laptop, a napkin or a smart-phone. Just write.

Talk with a trusted friend. Let them help you explore the possibilities of being you. I hope by



## Session Thirteen

### Learning to trust yourself

Once your adventure of self-discovery begins, you need to start sorting laundry into piles; you know, colors, lights, delicates etc. In one pile put the old false version of yourself. In the other pile put the new genuine version of yourself. Keep the two piles right in front of you. Remind yourself over and over: "That is who I used to be. This is who I am now." Keep the piles far enough apart so they are not mixed up or blended. Know for sure that you are NOT the person you used to be; the person THEY said you were. Trust this!

Slowly, but surely, you are making friends with reality. You are beautiful. You can establish and walk through a daily routine. You can make a positive contribution to this world. You can manage your money. You can have healthy relationships with the trusted people in your life. This is your new reality. It is solid, good and normal. This may take time but you can trust this!

You are learning the difference between unhealthy emotions that control your life versus healthy emotions that tell you how you are feeling about life. You are learning that emotions are gauges that tell you how your car is running. They are not the steering wheel or accelerator that determine where and how fast you drive. Your emotions are what they are. Sometimes they make sense. Sometimes they do not. Sometimes they seem to fit your circumstance. Sometimes they are a little over the top. This is what emotions do. You are not weird. Trust this!

You do not need someone to tell you how to feel or what to do. You are completely capable of making those choices on your own. You are no longer owned. You are a slave to NO ONE! You are made in God's image, with the full freedom to choose what your life will be. You are free to be right and you are free to be wrong. You are free to explore. You are free to experiment. You are free to risk. You are free to sit, stand, walk, run ... heck, try flying if you want (just show some respect for gravity). Trust this!

Just like checking off a to-do list, trust yourself with the little things first, then gradually and with patience get bigger and bigger. Trust yourself to order off a menu. Then trust yourself to take an alternate route to work. Then trust yourself to take care of a pet. Then trust yourself to make a significant purchase. Then trust yourself to step into a new relationship. See how it works? Trust this!

Over time you will begin to trust yourself with little-to-no calculation. You will develop instincts that will guide you. Remember, your instincts helped you survive some pretty dicey situations. These same instincts (newly mended) will begin to, in a calm, easy way, assert themselves into everyday "normal" life.

Some of the more crucial choices you will make involve friends, leisure time and use of money. These are the ones that can have long-term consequences:

The friends you hang out with hugely flavor your outlook on life. Steer clear of toxic dark

people. God loves them and so should you, just not close up.

Leisure time can relax and refresh you so you can engage the rest of your life in a healthy normal way. Or your time off can produce “hangovers” that cut your normal feet out from under you. Monday morning should begin with energy and hope, not regret and frustration.

Your use of money can ruin or enhance you. If you do not know how to handle money, find a trusted caring adviser who can walk you through budgets, savings accounts and grocery lists.

You can do normal and still be messed up, insecure, neurotic and emotional. This does not make you abnormal. Back in the day, you were just forced into an abnormal lifestyle. Trust yourself to discover and live in a new normal way, one small step at a time. Trust this!

Things to consider:

1. Talk about how this session made you feel; hopeful, insecure, bored, confused etc.

2. Talk about a choice you made on your own lately that produced a good outcome. Why do you think it turned out good?

3. Talk about a choice you made on your own lately that produced a not-so-good outcome. Can you talk about it without shaming yourself?

## Session Fourteen

### Learning to trust others.

You cannot live in a cave. It's not good for you, plus it's impossible. So at some point you're going to have to learn who you can trust and who you can't trust. What does trust look like? What characteristics should you look for in a trustworthy person? How can you be trustworthy to others?

We've already said that not everybody is evil. But let's get real, there are people who actually want to hurt and use you. There are some who don't care either way. Then, there are people who actually want to make you life safer and better. Eventually you will want to find a few who fit into this last category.

So, who can you trust? You can trust someone who listens to you. They look you in the eye. They are not distracted or bored. They remember from one encounter to the next what's going on in your life, the people and the details. They invest their time and energy in you. They do not expect to be paid back. Search your heart. Could you lay down and go to sleep with them in the house? Could you trust them with your most valuable possessions; your friends, even your children?

Do they try to convince you you can trust them? Or do you already know without them ever saying a word about trust?

What does trust look like? Do you have to change your look or your mood when they come around? Can you be weak and vulnerable around them? Does the room get brighter or heavier when they walk in? What does your heart do when their name shows up on caller ID? How are they with the late night and early morning version of you?

Do you trust yourself around them? Do you feel the need to impress them? Do you find yourself wanting to fix or correct them? Do you need them to need you? Are you tempted to live vicariously through them? Does their stuff always seem to become your stuff? Do you know where their drama ends and yours begins? Do you tend to throw them under the bus to save yourself? Or do you feel healthy and strong around them?

There are two basic ways to live. You are either afraid of losing what you have, or you explore the possibilities of what you could become. The first feels safe, but gets you stuck. The second feels unsafe, but is full of potential. Trusting others definitely fits into this second category. Yeah, it's risky. It will hurt and disappoint. It will present temptations to relapse. But you'll never grow if you're stuck in your solitary cave. Way back at the very beginning, God said it was "not good" for us to be alone. Human history (your history) has proven him right.

Safety may seem the best choice on the short term. But the benefits are disappointing. If you are going to discover your full potential, you will have to find at least a couple of other humans you can trust. Let them speak into your life. Let them in on your secrets and your hopes and dreams. What's the worst that can happen? What's the best that could happen?

Let yourself be loved. This is your new normal.  
Things to consider:

1. What is your greatest fear when it comes to trusting others?
2. Talk about what the term “new normal” means to you.
3. What would you like to say to the “you” who started this workbook?
4. You have examined your new normal. Discuss where you started, where you are and where you are going.

