

A young boy with short brown hair, wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt and blue pants, is sitting on a light-colored tiled floor. He is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the frame, facing away from the camera and looking out a large window. The window is filled with bright, natural light, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. In the foreground, a large, brown, plush teddy bear is lying on its side, partially obscuring the boy's feet. The bear is positioned in the lower-right quadrant. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Life After Foster Care

# A Survivor's Guide

**Tom Mann**

# Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

Life After Foster Care

*A SURVIVAL GUIDE*

*By Tom Mann*

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### INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! I mean it! CONGRATULATIONS! You survived foster care!

The fact that you were in foster care means that you suffered at least one traumatic event in your life – the separation from your biological family due to some significant event – and chances are you suffered much more than that to include physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse and neglect. And your maltreatment may not have been just at the hands of your biological family; you could have suffered while in foster care as well!

But you're a survivor! So am I.

I lived in about a half dozen foster homes and couch surfed another half dozen homes between the time I was three and 17 years old. My three older sisters and I were abused and neglected by our father who ended up in prison multiple times causing our foster care placements. Our mother was bed-ridden with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and could not take care of us. I reunited with my father after each jail stint only to eventually end up back in foster care when he once again drove us to ruin and went back to jail.

My experience in foster care in Oregon was a mixed bag – some good, some bad, some horrific. I actually was more traumatized by my foster care abuse than I ever was by my biological family. But I survived – at least I thought I did. What I didn't know was the effect the abuse, neglect, and other traumas would have on me. When I left foster care as a 17-year-old emancipated minor, I thought I had made it! Nothing could have been further from the truth. I was a dumpster fire, I just didn't know it yet!

I've wanted to write this book for a long time but honestly didn't really want to revisit the ghosts of my past in order to do it. I'm 54 years old and still relive the memories of my abuse often. That said, I also have found tremendous healing that I know that I am supposed to share with you, so after all these years I'm going to put it on paper!

My prayer for you is that you did not suffer. Perhaps you were removed from your biological parents at a very young age and had the perfect foster care placement with loving foster parents. Today, you find yourself well-adjusted and doing just fine! But that is not the case for a lot of us. Study after study shows that the abuse we suffered by our biological families coupled with placement(s) in foster care significantly disrupted our childhood development and affects our adult life relationally, educationally, vocationally, financially, mentally, and emotionally.

## Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

This book is a post-foster care survival guide. My goal is to share everything I have learned since leaving foster care 37 years ago so perhaps you can avoid some of the mistakes I made or at least can connect some dots to better understand what you may be thinking, feeling, and experiencing.

Everyone's experience is different, yet I am confident that my experiences will in some way relate to yours in such a way that you will find this book helpful as you move forward in your post-foster care journey.



### Chapter 1 - You're Not Okay

If you had told me that I was an emotional and mental train wreck after I graduated high school I would have told you that you were the one that was nuts! I was a 3.56 GPA student, drum major of the marching band, member of the yearbook committee, second-tier kind of popular with a group of friends. I had held a part-time job and was writing for my local weekly newspaper. I wasn't damaged; I was a Rockstar!

The first step of any 12-step program is admitting you have a problem. It took me another six years before I was ready to admit to that problem and the havoc I caused in those years haunt me to this day.

If you have suffered abuse whether it be physical, sexual, emotional, or mental you have a problem. When you are mistreated – especially by people of trust who are supposed to nurture and protect you – it messes with your head! And it doesn't have to be what you might consider direct abuse – it could simply be neglect. Love being withheld, not being fed or cared for, not having proper housing, moving multiple times without being able to establish relationships, loss of a parent due to divorce, abandonment or incarceration all will affect your brain development and emotional stability.

A 1998 study by June M. Clausen, Ph.D., John Landsverk, Ph.D., William Ganger, MA., David Chadwick, M.D., and Alan Litrownik, Ph.D. entitled *Mental Health Problem of Children in Foster Care* outlines it pretty well.

“Two major factors lead one to expect that children in foster care would exhibit significantly higher risk for mental health problems than children who are not in foster care. First, most of these children have experienced one or more forms of maltreatment sufficiently severe to bring them to the attention of Child Protective Services. For example, of the 93,294 children who received public social services in the state of California from January to March of 1987, 87% had experienced some form of documented child maltreatment (California State Department of Social Services, 1988). The short term (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Downs, 1993; Friedrich, 1993) and long term traumatic effects (e.g. Briere & Runtz, 1993; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Saunders, Villeponteaux, Lipovsky, Kilpatrick, & Veronen, 1992) of child maltreatment are well documented.

“Second, children in foster care are at heightened risk for mental health problems due to the negative effect of separation from their family. When an abused child, who has likely experienced difficulty developing appropriate attachment to his abusing caretakers, is removed from home and placed in foster care, he/she suffers further due to an inability to separate in a healthy way (Charles & Matheson, 1990; Kadushin, 1980). Indeed, the movement from his own home to the foster home engenders feelings of rejection, guilt, hostility, anger, abandonment, shame and dissociative reactions in response to the loss of a familiar environment and the separation from family and community (e.g., Katz, 1987). Clearly, a child who is abused or neglected and is subsequently removed from home is at great risk for the development of mental health problems.”<sup>[1]</sup>

In fact, studies show that while 18-22 percent of the general population suffer from some type of mental health disorder, 80 percent of foster children suffer from these conditions.<sup>[2]</sup> You can see from the chart below provided by the National Council of State Legislatures how foster care survivors are at higher risk for mental health issues.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

<b>Mental Illness</b>	<b>% of Foster Care Alumni</b>	<b>% of General Adult Population</b>
<b>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</b>	<b>21.5</b>	<b>4.5</b>
<b>Major Depressive Episode</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>10.6</b>
<b>Modified Social Phobia</b>	<b>11.9</b>	<b>8.9</b>
<b>Panic Disorder</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>3.6</b>
<b>Generalized Anxiety Disorder</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>5.1</b>
<b>Alcohol Dependence</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>2.0</b>
<b>Drug Dependence</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Bulimia</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>0.4</b>

### **Mental Health Disparities**

Perhaps you're one of the lucky 20 percent that has been unaffected by your foster care experience, but probably not. Like me, you probably suffer some type of mental/emotional health issue, and like me you were or are in denial about it!

### Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

I want to tackle PTSD first for two reasons: First, it's the most prevalent condition. Second, it's something I have struggled with and know intimately.

PTSD is a condition where the “fight or flight” part of your brain has been so intensely activated that it kind of gets stuck. PTSD can happen when you experience a life-threatening situation, or you experience fear so great or so often that your logical brain (frontal lobe) no longer overrides your fight or flight brain (amygdala). It's not just combat veterans who get PTSD; anyone who has suffered a trauma can get it, including survivors of car accidents, sexual assault, mugging, and, of course, child abuse. In fact, PTSD is your brain re-wiring itself to protect you from perceived threats. The problem is PTSD perceives threats where there are none!

Here are the symptoms of PTSD. If you exhibit several of them you may want to talk with your doctor or mental health provider about PTSD:

- Intrusive memories
- Guilt
- Poor judgment
- Loss of interest and motivation
- Anxiety
- Flashbacks
- Sleep disturbances
- Startle reflex
- Hypervigilance
- Lack of Feelings
- Poor self-esteem/negative self-image
- Isolation
- Irritability
- Frustration
- Anger/rage
- Emotional numbing
- Trust issues
- Physical manifestations – arthritis, ulcers, cardiac, diabetes
- Communication issues
- Depression
- Poor concentration and short-term memory



Quite a list? If you are anything like I was, you might have most of them, but not even realize it. After I graduated high school, I had a great summer as the drum major of a drum and bugle corps and then headed to the University of Missouri for college. It seemed as if my future were bright. But there were signs I missed.

I had my first drink when I was 14 years old. My dad was a functional alcoholic, and I was mixing drinks for his party guests by the time I was 10 years old. Alcohol was a norm in my environment, but I really didn't do a lot of drinking in high school. But soon after, I became a binge drinker – one or two drinks was not enough. I needed a short-case or more of beer, half a fifth, or a full bottle of wine to dull my senses and honestly my memories.

You see, I had what is known as “late onset” PTSD. I didn't start experiencing symptoms until after foster care, but all of a sudden, they hit me out of the blue. Flashbacks, intrusive memories, hypervigilance (I never felt safe), trust issues (I didn't trust anyone!), anxiety, frustration, irritation, anger and rage, emotional numbing, and more. I became someone I didn't recognize. I had no compassion for people, was always angry, was always concerned for my safety – physical and emotional – and I drank heavily to keep my mind from overwhelming me.

PTSD is a you-know-what! When your fight or flight triggers, you just can't stop it! I would see myself doing crazy stuff – punching holes in doors and walls, screaming at people I loved, creating conspiracy theories about how people were trying to hurt me emotionally and physically – and I knew it was wrong but I couldn't control it. Once something triggers you, you go bottle rocket. Or you completely shut down. Either way, you go to an extreme. Then comes the suicidal ideation. You think you'd be better off dead – that way you'll stop hurting others and yourself.

Then there is the omni-presence of memories. Because memories and emotions are in the same part of the brain, with PTSD you can actually feel as if you are re-experiencing events in the present when you think about the past. It's great for things like my wedding day – it feels as if it just happened last week! It absolutely sucks for the bad stuff, however, which also feels as if it just happened when it comes to mind. Not only do I have the memory of the event, but I have all the intensity of the accompanying emotions.

Any of that sound familiar? If so, don't do what I did. I was absolutely convinced as a 19-year-old kid that everyone else was nuts and I was the only sane person I knew! In fact, I was the one who was crazy and I wouldn't listen to the people around me telling me to get the help I needed. But, if I would have been honest with myself I would have seen that my behavior resulted in the same outcomes again and again no matter with whom I was dealing. Here's my rule of thumb: If you keep going through the same thing over and over, and you're the only common denominator, chances are it's you! I blamed everyone else when in fact it was me!

Please take my advice: Seek help if you're struggling with these symptoms. I cannot tell you the regret you will feel for the actions you will take while you are struggling with PTSD. You could lose everything that is important to you if you are too prideful (as I was) to get the help you need. PTSD does not have to be a life sentence. There is great therapy out there to help identify triggers, manage triggers, and overcome both the symptoms and causation of your pain. If you don't get help, your PTSD will wreck your relationships, affect your employment, steal your joy, and keep you a slave to your fear and anger. That is no way to live, my friend.

### **Depression/Anxiety**

These two emotional conditions often get lumped together and are treated similarly. Here are their symptoms:

Clinical Depression

- **Mood:** anxiety, apathy, general discontent, guilt, hopelessness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, mood swings, or sadness
- **Sleep:** early awakening, excess sleepiness, insomnia, or restless sleep
- **Whole body:** excessive hunger, fatigue, loss of appetite, or restlessness
- **Behavioral:** agitation, excessive crying, irritability, social isolation, and/or repeatedly going over thoughts
- **Cognitive:** lack of concentration, slowness in activity, or thoughts of suicide
- **Weight:** weight gain or weight loss<sup>[4]</sup>

### Anxiety

- Panic, fear, and uneasiness
- Sleep problems/tiredness
- Cannot stay calm and still
- Cold, sweaty, numb or tingling hands/feet
- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations/chest pain
- Dry mouth
- Tense muscles
- Dizziness
- Concentration issues
- Digestive issues
- Low-energy<sup>[5]</sup>

As you can see, PTSD, depression and anxiety have a lot of common symptoms. They all are categorized as emotional disorders and it's possible to have more than one condition. Again, if you are experiencing these symptoms and they last for several days or weeks at a time – even if they come and go – you need to see a doctor or counselor.

I want to make this VERY important point right now. Most the people I have spoken to about their conditions do not want to take medication, such as anti-depressants. Here's the deal about the meds: If your brain chemicals are messed up due to your abuse/neglect, there is nothing you can do yourself to fix them! The only thing that will get them back in working order is medication. Yeah, it sucks to have to take meds, but the reality is the meds can help regulate the chemicals you cannot control.

I know what I'm talking about! I refused to do meds for decades. Then I read that if you suffered child abuse that your brain serotonin levels get screwed up, which in turn affects your mood.<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps that's why I've been in a bad mood since 1982! I decided to take a SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) and amazingly my mood changed. Why? The drug kept more serotonin in my system longer, allowing my brain chemicals to actually work correctly. To think I could have had this stuff decades ago but was too prideful to try. It would have saved a lot of people a ton of heartache had I done it.

Depression and anxiety can severely affect your ability to function. What I have experienced with people struggling with these two issues is they will be okay but something will trigger them and then they will start a downward spiral. It is important that you learn to stop that spiral when it starts and not allow it to go deeper and deeper because once it gets too deep it's nearly impossible to pull out of it until it runs its course which can be days to weeks. Depression and anxiety also are dangerous because you can resort to self-harm in your faulty thinking. If you struggle with either of these you know that it's not just going to get better so do yourself a big favor and get some help!

### **Suicidal/Homicidal Ideation**

When I was three or four years old, my first prayer I remember saying to God was asking Him that I wouldn't wake up the next morning. Tragic when you think about it. But life was really bad: my dad had gone to jail for the first time in my life; my three sisters and I were separated into different family homes; and my bed-ridden mom and I were sent to Florida to live with her parents – people I had never really met before in a strange environment without my three older sisters and dad. That in and of itself was traumatic.

I used to think everyone thought about killing themselves – that thinking about suicide was normal.



It's not, but for foster kids it is a common thought. According to the National Center for the Prevention of Youth Suicide, foster kids are more at risk for suicide than the general population. Here are their statistics:

- Adolescents who had been in foster care were nearly four times more likely to have attempted suicide than other youth (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).
- Experiencing childhood abuse or trauma increased the risk of attempted suicide 2- to 5-fold (Dube et al., 2001).
- Adverse childhood experiences play a major role in suicide attempts. One study found that approximately two thirds of suicide attempts may be attributable to abusive or traumatic childhood experiences (Dube et al., 2001).<sup>[7]</sup>

The bottom line is this: If you are having thoughts of harming yourself – cutting, dangerous and or risky behaviors, suicide – you need to get help. They say that suicide is a long-term solution to a short-term problem. Well, I don't know if that is exactly true – mental health issues can be long-term problems. However, suicide doesn't actually solve the problem, it just passes it on to someone else – those you leave behind. You're not actually solving anything, you're just shifting your pain to the people you love.

I know what it feels like to be hopeless – not being able to figure a way out of the depths of your dark feelings. I also know what it's like feeling as if you'd be better off dead to those around you; at least you won't be hurting them anymore, right? Well, wrong. This is part of our faulty thinking that includes low to know self-esteem, negative self-talk, hopelessness, and a general darkness of spirit. And you know that it's not true because those around you probably have told you so, but you just don't want to believe them!

Instead, you have to swallow your pride, your pain, and your despair and get help. (Are you seeing a common theme here?) Life can and will get better. You will be useful, productive, and even important to someone else down the road. You have to have faith that the future does, indeed, have something for you! Suicide is never the answer because it eliminates the possibility of the things you could do in the future to help others!

While I was suicidal occasionally, I was constantly homicidal. Homicidal ideation is a weird thing: You are so freaked out that people are trying to hurt you that you fantasize about hurting EVERYONE you see just in case they turn on you! You are always on edge (hypervigilant) and suspect the worst motives from everyone. It sucks and is exhausting, too!

Neither suicidal nor homicidal ideation is normal. Thinking about hurting yourself and others is a mental condition and abnormal thinking. Perhaps you are like me and hide all this from others. People look at you and think you're pretty well-adjusted and doing just fine. But inside you know better. You're not well-adjusted and you're not fine. You're struggling because you know the feelings you're having are not right but you don't know what to do about them. You're afraid to go to counseling because you don't want to share the pain of your life; you don't want medication because then you'll be admitting you have a mental disorder. But my friend, you do have a mental disorder and it's not your fault. You've been the victim of horrible things and your brain is struggling to make sense of it all. Let me put it this way: If your arm were broken, you'd go to the doctor and get help. If you had a deep cut, you'd go to the doctor and get it stitched up. I'm telling you that your brain is broken and just like your arm and the cut you need to go to the doctor and get some help for your melon.

### **Abandonment Syndrome**

Abandonment is a biggie for foster kids, especially those with repeated placements. I'm going to reprint the following from Claudia Black, M.S.W., Ph.D. from her article *Understanding the Pain of Abandonment – Living with Repeated Abandonment Experiences Creates Toxic Shame*. A special thank you to Dr. Black for giving me permission to use this excellent treatise!

“When children are raised with chronic loss, without the psychological or physical protection they need and certainly deserve, it is most natural for them to internalize incredible **fear**. Not receiving the necessary psychological or physical protection equals abandonment. And, living with repeated abandonment experiences creates toxic **shame**. Shame arises from the painful message implied in abandonment: "You are not important. You are not of value." This is the pain from which people need to heal.

“For some children abandonment is primarily physical. Physical abandonment occurs when the physical conditions necessary for thriving have been replaced by:

- lack of appropriate supervision
- inadequate provision of **nutrition** and meals
- inadequate clothing, housing, heat, or shelter
- physical and/or sexual **abuse**

“Children are totally dependent on caretakers to provide safety in their environment. When they do not, they grow up believing that the world is an unsafe place, that people are not to be trusted, and that they do not deserve positive attention and adequate care. Emotional abandonment occurs when **parents** do not provide the emotional conditions and the emotional environment necessary for healthy development. I like to define emotional abandonment as ‘occurring when a child has to hide a part of who he or she is in order to be accepted, or to not be rejected.’

“Having to hide a part of yourself means:

- It is not okay to make a mistake.
- It is not okay to show feelings; being told the way you feel is not true. ‘You have nothing to cry about and if you don't stop crying I will really give you something to cry about.’ ‘That really didn't hurt.’ ‘You have nothing to be angry about.’
- It is not okay to have needs. Everyone else's needs appear to be more important than yours.
- It is not okay to have successes. Accomplishments are not acknowledged, are many times discounted.

“Other acts of abandonment occur when:

- Children cannot live up to the expectations of their parents. These expectations are often unrealistic and not age-appropriate.
- Children are held responsible for other people's behavior. They may be consistently blamed for the actions and feelings of their parents.
- Disapproval toward children is aimed at their entire beings or **identity** rather than a particular behavior, such as telling a child he is worthless when he does not do his homework or she is never going to be a good athlete because she missed the final catch of the game.

“Many times, abandonment issues are fused with distorted, confused, or undefined boundaries such as:

- When parents do not view children as separate beings with distinct boundaries
- When parents expect children to be extensions of themselves
- When parents are not willing to take responsibility for their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, but expect children to take responsibility for them
- When parents' [self-esteem](#) is derived through their child's behavior
- When children are treated as peers with no parent/child distinction

“Abandonment plus distorted boundaries, at a time when children are developing their sense of worth, is the foundation for the belief in their own inadequacy and the central cause of their shame.

“Abandonment experiences and boundary violations are in no way indictments of a child's innate goodness and value. Instead, they reveal the flawed thinking, false beliefs, and impaired behaviors of those who hurt them. Still, the wounds are struck deep in their young hearts and minds, and the very real pain can still be felt today. The causes of emotional injury need to be understood and accepted so they can heal. Until that occurs, the pain will stay with them, becoming a driving force in their adult lives.”<sup>[8]</sup>



Every single one of us who has been a foster kid has been abandoned at some point. If you have had multiple placements as I had, you experience that abandonment over and over and over again. It messes you up. As you can see from the article, the consequences of this abandonment can very much contribute to the symptomology of the emotional issues of PTSD, depression and anxiety. It's all connected because, again, your brain is trying desperately to make sense of all the trauma and is creating defense mechanisms to protect itself from future harm! It's actually normal for it do to so! But again, unfortunately, when the threat is gone our brains do not simply revert back to its pre-abuse state. Instead, it stays wired in preparation for more abuse thus creating significant problems as we move from adolescence to adulthood. My advice? Get help!

### **Self-Medicating**

I'm going to finish up this chapter with the reasons behind and the problems with self-medicating.

I do a bit of public speaking and I like to ask my audience which is worse, physical pain or emotional pain? Overwhelmingly people say emotional pain. That is my experience as well. Physical pain heals. You can take pain killers to dull physical pain. You can wrap it, heat it, ice it, baby it, massage it, stabilize it, splint it, and heal it. Emotional pain doesn't work that way. It sticks with you in one form or another for a life time. It never truly heals – its scars burn.

Many foster kids and victims of abuse use a variety of methods to self-medicate in order to dull the pain of their experience. The most common are drugs and alcohol, but people also “medicate” with relationships, work, risky behavior, self-harm and anything else that will take your mind off the emotional pain you are feeling. The problem is you’re just masking the issue not solving it. That means you will always have the issue which will require more and more self-medicating to make it go away for just short periods of time.

Personally, I self-medicated with alcohol. A lot of it! Like many who self-medicate, I wasn’t addicted to alcohol. I quit several times for long periods. But I did use alcohol often to deaden the pain of my past, and help me sleep, even though I would have violent dreams and nightmares.

I also self-medicated with work. In college, I took 22 credit hours, ran a student newspaper, studied karate, worked part-time and had a girlfriend. I did everything I could to take up all my time so I wouldn’t be alone and have to think. After college, I worked 72-hour weeks as a newspaper editor and filled up my free time partying. Free time was the enemy. Even when I was better adjusted, I worked significant hours (50+) and even held multiple jobs to fill the time. I actually hate down time because that’s when my brain starts to think about the past.

For me, bedtime was the worst. It's when my "demons" of the past would come to talk with me – just lying there with all the little compartmentalized boxes in my head popping open! So, I often would drink before I went to bed. I rationalized it as helping me sleep when I knew dang well it was to keep the boxes in my head closed.

How about you? Are you drinking or using marijuana or some other substance to get you through the dark days and nights? Do you work too much? Are you relying on some relationship to help you through? (I did that, too!). It's not healthy and it's not sustainable. Eventually that house of cards you're building will fall down. And when it does, it crashes HARD!

Realize that what you're doing is just replacing needed therapy and perhaps prescribed medication with other methods without direction, guidance, goals, outcomes and controls. While seeking professional help leads to a life where you don't need to medicate, self-medicating leads to a life where you just need more because you're not solving any problem.

Yes, it's scary to think about stopping and getting real help. I won't lie – it always gets worse before it gets better because counseling means you'll actually have to deal with your issues instead of just masking them! But here's the deal, what you're doing may seem like it's working, but it's really not. It's like putting a band-aid on a gushing artery. You're going to bleed out. Eventually self-medicating won't work anymore.

I've seen people lose their marriage, their kids, their jobs, and everything they valued because of their refusal to stop self-medicating. Don't be that guy/gal – get help before you get to that point. The meds they can prescribe work better than the booze and drugs anyway. Plus, you'll be working toward the goal of healing instead of the goal of just getting through another day. Trust me on this one! I stopped drinking 23 years ago and I'm okay. You can be as well!

In this chapter, I've just hit the main issues we face due to our abuse and neglect. PTSD, depression, anxiety, abandonment, suicidal/homicidal ideation, and self-medicating are common. However, more severe conditions, such as personality disorders, bi-polar, schizophrenia, and other psychoses could also be present. Being able to self-diagnose these things is very hard! Not only do we not necessarily understand them, but we also can be in denial about them at such a deep level that we simply do not see what everyone around us does!

Here's my advice: If people around you are telling you that your behavior is inappropriate or abnormal, believe them. I don't mean if one person says it, but if those closest to you are concerned for you and have had the courage to say something don't just blow them off. People on the outside see us much more clearly than we can see ourselves, especially because we've created a ton of defense mechanisms to keep us from dealing with these problems.

One of my greatest regrets is not getting help in my late teens to early 20s. I hurt myself and others by denying and ignoring my condition. I would save you that experience by suggesting you do what I couldn't: listen to those who love you and get the help you need – you'll be glad you did!

### Chapter 2 - Triggers

If you are struggling with anything we discussed in Chapter 1, the next thing you need to consider is triggers. I found this great explanation from the University of Alberta's Sexual Assault Center. Here's how they explain the concept of triggers:

*A trigger* is something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma.

Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback. She/he will react to this flashback, trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

The senses identified as being the most common to trigger someone are sight and sound, followed by touch and smell, and taste close behind. A combination of the senses is identified as well, especially in situations that strongly resemble the original trauma. Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes.

### Sight

- Often someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits or objects (i.e. clothing, hair color, distinctive walk).
- Any situation where someone else is being abused (i.e. anything from a raised eyebrow and verbal comment to actual physical abuse).
- The object that was used to abuse
- The objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place (i.e. alcohol, piece of furniture, time of year).
- Any place or situation where the abuse took place (i.e. specific locations in a house, holidays, family events, social settings).

### Sound

- Anything that sounds like anger (i.e. raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking).
- Anything that sounds like pain or fear (i.e. crying, whispering, screaming).
- Anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds her/him of the abuse (i.e. sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing).
- Anything that resembles sounds that the abuser made (i.e. whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice).
- Words of abuse (i.e. cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used).

## Smell

- Anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (i.e. tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume).
- Any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (i.e. food cooking, wood, odors, alcohol).

## Touch

Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (i.e. certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you).

## Taste

Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (i.e. certain foods, alcohol, tobacco).

[9]

For those of us who experience triggers none of the above is surprising. However, this may be the first time you've been introduced to the idea so it may be connecting dots for you, such as why you react the way you do to every day things that seem common to everyone else! The thing about triggers is you may not know what yours really are due to repressed memories or simply not being able to associate the trigger to an specific event in your life.



However, it is vital you understand that these triggers can bring back memories of the trauma and cause intense emotional and physical reactions ranging from shutting down completely to uncontrollable rage and everything in between. It is critical that you learn what triggers you, understand why things trigger you, and develop management tools for your triggers. If you don't, you will be an emotional train wreck 24/7 and unable to function properly in most social settings because you will be triggered and have no idea why.

I really can't tell you what your triggers are, all I can do is help you understand them by sharing some of mine and hope that you will see how they relate to your specific life experiences. So, at the risk of sharing too much information, here are things that set me off and how I deal with them.

**The Smell of Gasoline** – When I was six years old, a five-year-old friend and I were taken out by a 12-year-old friend to go look for fireworks. It was a couple days before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and we were interested in finding a place to get firecrackers. In our walk around the neighborhood, the older kid told us that if we put a match in the gas tank of a car it would be a great firework. We didn't know any better so we did. The first match didn't work – it went out. The second match burned but didn't do anything.

The third match – Vruuuuummm – fire exploded out of the tank and burned my buddy and me pretty severely. The gas tank was full so it just acted like a flame thrower instead of blowing up; I had burning gas on my entire face and head; my buddy had burning gas on his face and shoulder. The older kid just ran off. To this day, the smell of gas triggers the memory of the heat, the burning sensation, my sister, Diane, trying to help, and the hospital. I also get a little ticked off at the older kid who took advantage of us – to this day I don't care for the smell of gas and I get triggered with anger when I feel someone is trying to put one over on me.

**Humiliation** – I was with my dad when he was out of jail one time. He was a con man who pretended to be a player when in fact he would just run up credit cards until they turn them off. We were staying at the Playboy Club in downtown Chicago. One night we went to see a show – I believe it was Harry Blackstone, Jr. He asked for volunteers and my dad agreed I should go up. Well, Blackstone didn't want a kid – I was about 13 – and told me to go back to my seat to my babysitter. The room laughed at the joke. I was PISSED! At the time I vowed that if I ever caught him alone he'd be done for! Obviously, I've forgiven him today, but I was humiliated and bullied in school, humiliated and bullied in foster care, humiliated and bullied pretty much everywhere. So, when this clown did it, it kind of pushed me over the edge and to this day I have a rage trigger to humiliation or when I see others being humiliated. It is so strong that I have to curb the urge to get physically violent.

**Being Touched on My Face** – I had the weirdest thing happen a few years back. My wife did a simple gesture of caressing my face and I went nuts! I had no idea why! Once I calmed down, I thought about it for several hours and a memory came back. When I was about three-years-old, I was with my mother and I caressed her face like Lisa had mine. She wept – she was paralyzed with MS and certainly the loving gesture by her young son touched her. Well, my dad thought I had hurt her and punished me pretty good for it. I don't think anyone had touched my face like that since, but when my wife did it sent me over the edge because it triggered the beating I took for touching my mother the same way.

**Hair in My Face** – My older sisters used to play this game when they would hold me down and dangle their long hair in my face and tickle me. It was all fun and games but today I HATE having hair in my face or anything that makes me feel as if I can't breathe. It triggers a panic-like feeling in me and the need to escape!

**Being Lied To** – My dad was a habitual liar. He lied about EVERYTHING. So obviously I'm not the most trusting sort. It doesn't really matter what you tell me – your actions are what I watch. If your actions don't line up with your words you're pretty much dead to me. It triggers a response in me that I just turn off my emotions toward the person like a light switch.

**Being Left Alone** – As if being separated from my family over and over again didn't spark abandonment issues, I had one foster father – who was a drunk – leave me and his bio kid in a park while he went drinking. I think I was about 10 and the bio kid was about five. We were in a neighborhood we didn't know; were there for hours by ourselves; and we really didn't know if this guy was going to come back and get us or not. I decided that we should find a house and call someone. I called the foster mom who found the foster dad who came and got us. Then he proceeded to call me a coward and a pussy for not trusting that he'd come back and get us. To this day, I don't like when my wife has to leave town or even when I don't know where she is. It makes me anxious and triggers those abandonment feelings. I also get triggered if I ever feel fear because I feel cowardly so I do things to prove I'm not a coward, which has its own consequences.

**Being in Other People's Homes** – Okay, this one is not rocket science. After being placed in strange homes again and again, I'm never really comfortable being in someone else's house. Even if it's people I know. For example, my in-laws are the nicest people and we go visit during holidays and such. And as nice as they are – and they are – I am SO uncomfortable in their home. They are completely welcoming, but my triggers go off not because of them, but because it's not my home and I'm staying there. I much prefer to stay at a hotel down the road, which is really weird to them. It's really hard to explain triggers to people because they simply make no sense to someone who hasn't had them. But this one is difficult for me because normal people are okay staying in other people's homes. I'm not, which is awkward.

**Crowds** – Nothing better than hitting the mall to go Christmas shopping, right? UGH! When there are too many people around me, especially in my personal space or even touching/running into me – it fires me up! It's probably the hypervigilance thing where I feel unsafe around a lot of people. I tend to get angry in those situations as a defense mechanism. My wife is pretty awesome, though – she watches how tightly I am gripping the shopping cart and if she sees I'm "white knuckling" it, she says, "Come on, Tom, it's time to leave."

**Inconsiderate People** – I just HATE people who can't show common courtesy, especially while driving! Just let the guy merge! If the guy has his blinker on, LET HIM IN! Don't weave in and out of traffic as if where you're going is more important than the rest of us! Don't try to take cuts in line. You're not better than the rest of us! Rude and inconsiderate people really trigger something in me – probably because I was bullied and treated badly by people. So, when I see it I want to respond by "correcting" those people. But I don't. I have pretty good self-control that way. But I sure do think it! As a foster kid, you can get an inferiority complex – feel less than everyone else – based on the fact that in all reality we were just state property. It is really important to build up a healthy self-esteem after foster care or you will struggle as I did with this issue.

**Injustice** – This is an obvious one as well. If you've been unjustly treated, you tend to stand up for anyone else (including yourself) who is treated badly. At my worst, I would pick a fight with ANYONE I perceived as treating another person badly. I can't say my perception was always right or that my methods were always appropriate. I was more like Don Quixote tilting at any windmill I could find! But, I've defended employees in the workplace to my own detriment; stood up for people in public and am a raging lion when someone tries to act unjustly or unfairly toward me. I'm much more reserved now, probably because I'm getting older and mellowing out a bit, but it still triggers a strong response in me.

**When Equipment Doesn't Work** – I have no idea why, but I lose my freaking mind when machines don't work. Whether it's a computer that updates and loses all your files, or a cell phone that doesn't tell you that you have a voicemail for three days, or PowerPoint presentation that doesn't play – it just drives me *nuts!* I actually have no idea why other than feeling as if things will go completely wrong when these little irritants happen.

**Violence** – When you've suffered violence I supposed you can react in several ways. I trigger a couple different ways. First, I'm always scared and want to avoid the conflict. That happens when I have time to think about what I am seeing and experiencing. However, if I don't have time to think about what I am seeing, I turn into the Hulk and react violently myself. As David Banner used to say, "You wouldn't like me when I'm mad."

**Other Men Around My Wife** – I have an unreasonable anxiety about other men hitting on and flirting with my wife. Not that I think my wife would ever do anything to betray me – she’s awesome. But every woman in my childhood was taken from me – my mom, my three sisters, and other women. When I started dating, those relationships also ended with the girl leaving, contributing to my abandonment stuff. So, I struggle with the fear of being left by an intimate or having them taken from me.

**My Own Incompetence** – If you’re a former foster kid, you know that making mistakes mentally and emotionally can be costly. You may be like me and have an unhealthy preoccupation with performing at a very high level. I get extremely angry with myself when I do dumb things. Today, the consequences for those things are minimal, but they trigger all that childhood stuff about making mistakes that have consequences. Simple things like misplacing my keys, dropping something, not thinking about something quickly enough, and other stupid stuff sends me through the roof! I tend to get irritated with others who I perceive as incompetent as well.

Okay, enough about me! I have more but let’s talk about how to manage the triggers you may have.

In the old days, I actually couldn't control any of these triggers. I didn't know what they were, I didn't know where they came from, I didn't know when they'd hit, and I didn't know how I'd react. Today, obviously, I can identify them, name them, tell you where they came from, explain how I react to them, but what I haven't shared yet is how I manage them. Although all the things I've shared still bother me, I have pretty good control over them – they don't control me and even when something does trigger me I can recover within minutes where in the old days it could be days or weeks before I was off the ceiling.

Here's the secret – you have to intentionally decided how you want to *act* to a trigger instead of just allowing your fight/flight to take over and *react* anyway it wants. In other words, **you need to replace your reaction with an intentional action**. This is the first step in the management process. Let me give you an example.

I have to buy gas for my car, which means I have to go to the gas station and smell gas. Before I learned to manage things, that smell always brought a little fear to me – even sitting safely in my car as the tank filled up (we don't do self-serve in Oregon!). I was actually terrified the first time I had to fill the tank myself in another state! It brought back so many memories of the fire!



To get over it, I changed my thinking by intentionally replacing my fearful reaction with an action. In other words, when I would smell gas I would intentionally push out my habitual reaction and intentionally think about something else. Specifically, I would stop thinking about being burned up and start thinking about where I was going to drive next, what my gas mileage was for the previous tank, check my phone for emails, Facebook, and other messages, and basically just distract myself a bit. By making that my habit instead of thinking about nearly blowing myself up, going to the gas station and smelling gas doesn't bother me a bit anymore.

Let me take one that was much harder: violence. When I feel as if I am in danger, I have the normal fight/flight reaction everyone does, but I don't let it get out of control anymore. First, I think to myself, "I'm okay." Then I do my best to engage my logical brain to override my fight/flight brain – analyze the situation to see if I'm really in danger or just paranoid. This takes about a second if that. If I'm in real danger, I can then make a plan. If not, I can de-escalate. In the old days, I couldn't turn it off and de-escalate – imagine living in a world where you perceived every situation resulting in potential violence and not being able to control your brain's hypervigilance to protecting against that violence! That had to change. To do so, I had to learn how to engage the logical frontal lobe of my brain so I'm not just running on emotion, believing I have to fight everyone who I perceive threatens me; I'm actually thinking through the problem to determine if I'm threatened or not. It's helped a lot! I don't just react anymore.

Understand that our triggers are how our mind protects itself. We've experienced some pretty hard stuff and our minds have created defense mechanisms to deal with it. Those defense mechanisms are turned on by the trigger event! It's actually quite logical when you think about it! But it's not always appropriate in polite society to act out your trigger defenses!

On the next page is an exercise I created to help you identify your triggers, figure out how you react to them, determine how you would like to react and then gives you the opportunity to work on **replacing your reaction with an action**. My suggestion to you is that you do this exercise and then take one trigger at a time and rework your reaction by replacing it with the appropriate intentional action. It will take a couple months for it to work – they say a new habit takes 40 days of continual application – but it will work! And believe me, when you can control your triggers instead of them controlling you, your life will fundamentally change!

### TRIGGERS EXERCISE

Identify the things that trigger you (sights, sounds, smells, words, incidents, etc.) and put them in column one. In column two, write down your reaction to each of these triggers. In column three, write down how you would rather respond to your triggers. Exercise to replace re-action with action.



I've shared this but I want to re-emphasize it – I lost EVERYTHING because I couldn't control my triggers – jobs, relationships, college, and more. And as those triggers controlled most of my actions, my defense mechanisms would never allow me to first admit that I had a problem and second ever seek help – even just a little to modify my behavior! Such a waste of so many years of my life.

I just don't want you to live like that. There is more for you than being torn apart by the pain in your mind. Trigger management is the first step. There is more, but once you can manage how you act when triggered the rest becomes so much easier.

That said, I want to encourage you to take a chance and really work to identify what triggers you. If you can't figure it out, ask someone close to you for help. Specifically, brainstorm with them what kinds of things upset you – make you mad, sad, depressed, cry, shut down or some other emotional response. Once you make that list, then see if you can identify episodes in your life that would rationally explain your reactions. I think you might be surprised to see how those dots connect in your life!

### Chapter 3 - Decision Making

Those of us who have experienced childhood dysfunction, abuse, and neglect have been damaged in our childhood development. If you study how the brain develops and functions, you will learn that there are different development phases we all go through. Women's brains develop fully at around age 22, while men take a little longer – we don't develop fully until 25. The Institute for Human Services for The Ohio Child Welfare Training Program produced a document in October 2007 called Developmental Milestones Chart for its child welfare protection staff. Content from the book was adapted from "The Field Guide to Child Welfare Volume III: Child Development and Child Welfare" by Judith S. Rycus, Ph.D., and Ronald C. Hughes, Ph.D. Child Welfare League of America Press 1998. The following excerpt is from that Ohio training program and will outline the various child development phases and the possible effects of being maltreated during one of these phases according to the document. From this, you will be able to see how your behavioral development dysfunction may affect your adult decision making!

## Birth to Three Years Old

### *Cognitive Development*

- Sensory-motor: physically explores environment to learn about it; repeats movements to master them, which also stimulates brain cell development
- 4-5 months: Coos, curious and interested in environment
- 6 months: Babbles and imitates sounds
- 9 months: Discriminates between parents and others; trial and error problem solving
- 12 months: Beginning of symbolic thinking; points to pictures in books in response to verbal cue; object permanence; some may use single words; receptive language more advanced than expressive language
- 15 months: Learns through imitating complex behaviors; knows objects are used for specific purposes
- 24 months: Two-word phrases; uses more complex toys and understands sequence of putting toys, puzzles together

### *Social Development*

- Attachment: baby settles when parent comforts; toddler seeks comfort from parent, safe-base exploration
- 5 months: Responsive to social stimuli; facial expressions of emotion
- 9 months: Socially interactive; plays games (i.e., pattycake) with caretakers
- 11 months: Stranger anxiety; separation anxiety; solitary play
- 24 months: Imitation, parallel and symbolic, play

### *Emotional Development*

- Learns fundamental trust in self, caretakers and environment
- Rudimentary mastery of environment – can get others to take care of them
- “Terrible Twos” may begin with willfulness, stubbornness, tantrums
- 18-36 months
  - Feel pride when they are “good” and embarrassment when they are “bad”
  - Can recognize distress in others – beginnings of empathy
  - They are emotionally attached to toys or objects of security

### Possible Effects of Maltreatment

## Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

- Chronic malnutrition resulting in growth retardation, brain damage, possible mental disabilities
- Head injuries and shaking resulting in skull fractures, mental disabilities, cerebral palsy, paralysis, coma, death, blindness, deafness
- Internal organ injuries
- Delays in gross and fine motor skills, poor muscle tone
- Language and speech delays; may not use language to communicate
- Insecure or disorganized attachment; overly clingy, lack of discrimination of significant people, can't use parent as source of comfort
- Passive, withdrawn, apathetic, unresponsive to others
- Frozen watchfulness, fearful, anxious, depressed
- Feel as if they are "bad"
- Immature play – cannot be involved in reciprocal interactive play



## Preschool Age

### *Cognitive Development*

- Ego-centric, illogical, magical thinking
- Explosion of vocabulary; learning syntax, grammar; understood by 75% of people by age 3
- Poor understanding of time, value, sequence of events
- Vivid imaginations; some difficulty separating fantasy from reality
- Accurate memory, but more suggestible than older children
- Primitive drawing, can't represent themselves in drawing till age 4
- Don't realize others have different perspective
- Leave out important facts
- May misinterpret visual cues of emotions
- Receptive language better than expressive till age 4

### *Social Development*

- Develops gross and fine motor skills; social skills; experiment with social roles; reduces fears
- Cooperative, imaginative, may involve fantasy and imaginary friends, takes turns in games

- Play
- Wants to please adults
- Development of conscience: incorporates parental prohibitions; feels guilty when disobedient; simplistic idea of “good and bad” behavior
- Curious about his and other’s bodies, may masturbate
- No sense of privacy
- Primitive, stereotypic understanding of gender roles

### *Emotional Development*

- Self-esteem based on what others tell him or her
- Increasing ability to control emotions; less emotional outbursts
- Increased frustration tolerance
- Better delay gratification
- Rudimentary sense of self
- Understands concepts of right and wrong
- Self-esteem reflects opinions of significant others
- Curious Self-directed in many activities

### Possible Effects of Maltreatment

- Poor muscle tone, motor coordination
- Poor pronunciation, incomplete sentences
- Cognitive delays; inability to concentrate
- Cannot play cooperatively; lack curiosity, absent imaginative and fantasy play
- Social immaturity: unable to share or negotiate with peers; overly bossy, aggressive, competitive
- Attachment problems: overly clingy, superficial attachments, show little distress or over-react when separated from caregiver
- Underweight from malnourishment; small stature Excessively fearful, anxious, night terrors
- Reminders of traumatic experience may trigger severe anxiety, aggression, preoccupation
- Lack impulse control, little ability to delay gratification
- Exaggerated response (tantrums, aggression) to even mild stressors
- Poor self-esteem, confidence; absence of initiative
- Blame self for abuse, placement
- Physical injuries; sickly, untreated illnesses
- Involuntary urination or defecation, self-stimulating behavior – rocking, head-banging

## School Aged

### *Cognitive Development*

- Use language as a communication tool
- Perspective taking
  - 5-8: can recognize others' perspectives, can't assume the role of the other
  - 8-10: recognize difference between behavior and intent;
  - 10-11: can accurately recognize and consider others' viewpoints
- Concrete operations:
  - Accurate perception of events; rational, logical thought;
  - Concrete thinking; reflect upon self and attributes; understands concepts of space, time, dimension
- Can remember events from months, or years earlier
- More effective coping skills
- Understands how his behavior affects others

### *Social Development*

- Friendships are situation specific
- Understands concepts of right and wrong

- Rules relied upon to guide behavior and play, and provide child with structure and security
- 5-6: believe rules can be changed
- 7-8: strict adherence to rules
- 9-10: rules can be negotiated
- Begin understanding social roles; regards them as inflexible; can adapt behavior to fit different situations; practices social roles
- Takes on more responsibilities at home
- Less fantasy play, more team sports, board games
- Morality: avoid punishment; self-interested exchanges

### *Emotional Development*

- Self-esteem based on ability to perform and produce
- Alternative strategies for dealing with frustration and expressing emotions
- Sensitive to other's opinions about themselves
- 6-9: have questions about pregnancy, intercourse, sexuality, look for nude pictures in books, magazines
- 10-12: games with peeing, sexual activity (e.g., strip poker, truth/dare, boy-girl relationships, flirting, some kissing, stroking/rubbing, re-enacting intercourse with clothes on)

### Possible Effects of Maltreatment

## Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

- Poor social/academic adjustment in school: preoccupied, easily frustrated, emotional outbursts, difficulty concentrating, can be overly reliant on teachers; academic challenges are threatening, cause anxiety
- Little impulse control, immediate gratification, inadequate coping skills, anxiety, easily frustrated, may feel out of control
- Extremes of emotions, emotional numbing; older children may “self-medicate” to avoid negative emotions
- Act out frustration, anger, anxiety with hitting, fighting, lying, stealing, breaking objects, verbal outbursts, swearing
- Extreme reaction to perceived danger (i.e., “fight, flight, freeze” response)
- May be mistrustful of adults, or overly solicitous, manipulative
- May speak in unrealistically glowing terms about his parents
- Difficulties in peer relationships; feel inadequate around peers; over-controlling
- Unable to initiate, participate in, or complete activities, give up quickly
- Attachment problems: may not be able to trust, tests commitment of foster and adoptive parent with negative behaviors
- Role reversal to please parents, and take care of parent and younger siblings
- Emotional disturbances: depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, attachment problems, conduct disorders

## Adolescents

### *Cognitive Development*

- Think hypothetically:
  - Calculate consequences of thoughts and actions without experiencing them;
  - Consider a number of possibilities and plan behavior accordingly
- Think logically:
  - Identify and reject hypotheses or possible outcomes based on logic
  - Think hypothetically, abstractly, logically
- Think about thought:

### **Leads to introspection and self-analysis**

- Insight, perspective taking:
  - Understand and consider others' perspectives, and perspectives of social systems**
- Systematic problem solving:
- Formal operations: precursors in early adolescence, more developed in middle and late adolescence, as follows:
- Cognitive development is uneven, and impacted by emotionality

- Can attack a problem
- Consider multiple solutions
- Plan a course of action
  
- Think logically:
  - Identify and reject hypotheses or possible outcomes based on logic
  - Think hypothetically, abstractly, logically
- Think about thought:

### **Leads to introspection and self-analysis**

- Insight, perspective taking:  
**Understand and consider others' perspectives, and perspectives of social systems**
  
- Systematic problem solving:
  - Can attack a problem
  - Consider multiple solutions
  - Plan a course of action

### *Social Development*



- Psychologically distance self from parents
- Identify with peer group
- Social status largely related to group membership
- Social acceptance depends on conformity to observable traits or roles
- Need to be independent from all adults
- Ambivalent about sexual relationships, sexual behavior is exploratory
- Young (12 – 14):
- Middle (15 – 17):
  - Friendships based on loyalty
  - Understanding, trust
  - Self-revelation is first step towards intimacy
  - Conscious choices about adults to trust
  - Respect honesty and straightforwardness from adults
  - May become sexually active
  - Morality: golden rule; conformity with law is necessary for good of society

### *Emotional Development*

- Self-conscious about physical appearance and early or late development
- Body image rarely objective

- Emotionally labile
- May over-react to parental questions or criticisms
- Engage in activities for intense emotional experience
- Risky behavior
- Negatively affected by physical and sexual abuse
  
- Blatant rejections of parental standards
- Rely on peer group for support
  
- Psycho-social task is identity formation
  - Young adolescents (12-14):
  - Middle adolescents (15-17):
  
- Negatively affected by physical and sexual abuse
- Emotionally labile
- May over-react to parental questions or criticisms
- Engage in activities for intense emotional experience
- Risky behavior
- Blatant rejections of parental standards
- Rely on peer group for support

Possible Effects of Maltreatment

- Examination of others' values, beliefs;
- Forms identity by organizing perceptions of one's attitudes, behaviors, values into coherent "whole";
- Identity includes positive self-image comprised of cognitive and affective components
- Additional struggles with identity formation include minority or biracial status, being an adopted child, gay/lesbian identity
- All of the problems listed in school age section
- Identity confusion: inability to trust in self to be a healthy adult; expect to fail; may appear immobilized and without direction
- Poor self-esteem: pervasive feelings of guilt, self-criticism, overly rigid expectations for self, inadequacy
- May overcompensate for negative self-esteem by being narcissistic, unrealistically self-complimentary; grandiose expectations for self
- May engage in self-defeating, testing, and aggressive, antisocial, or impulsive behavior; may withdraw
- Lack capacity to manage intense emotions; may be excessively labile, with frequent and violent mood swings
- May be unable to form or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers
- Emotional disturbances: depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, attachment problems, conduct disorders<sup>[10]</sup>

Wow, was that depressing to read! It was kind of tough seeing me in all those different development phases and how it played out personally in the maltreatment sections. The fact of the matter is when I aged out of foster care I was a ticking time bomb! The sad part was not only did I not know it, nobody else seemed to see it either or at least they didn't say much about it.

The wheels started coming off for me when I got to college. All of the abuse and neglect I suffered surfaced when I was on my own. I had PTSD; I had abandonment syndrome; I had narcissistic tendencies if not downright narcissistic personality disorder; I self-medicated heavily; I was unable to maintain appropriate relationships with peers and especially intimate relationships with women; I engaged in self-defeating and aggressive behavior; I had anger issues; I had trust issues; I had hypervigilance; I was controlling; I was jealous; I had flashbacks and nightmares – in short, I was the textbook case of the results of child abuse, neglect, separation, and abandonment. They ought to write a book about me!

What does this have to do with our topic, decision making? EVERYTHING!

Imagine being that much of a nut job and having to make daily decisions, such as filling out a job application, or doing an in-person employment interview. How about picking an apartment to live in and figuring out how to pay rent, utilities, phone, car payments, car insurance, and food while at the same time trying to navigate living with roommates! How about deciding on which courses to take in college, what major to choose, and how to act appropriately in the dorm, fraternity or classroom when you are triggered by something.

Or what about trying to form relationships with people and finding out that a lot of people just use you for what you can do for them and don't really want a life-long friendship with you. What car do you buy? How much should the interest be on your loan? Do you get one of those credit cards they try to give you in college? Do you actually buy the life insurance the guy was hawking door to door? These are all decisions you have to make pretty much right after you get out of high school and age out of the foster care system!

For me, I just went with my gut! It's how I ended up paying 18 percent interest on a car loan – I didn't know any better! It's also how I got into a life insurance policy at 22 years old – I figured I would be dead by 35 so it was a good deal! Doh! Instead of working within the system at college, I fought the system because it triggered my justice issues, which also was a bad decision. I basically felt like a spinning top not really knowing where I was going or what I was going to bump into next.

My problem was I had extremely faulty thinking. I knew that what my dad did was wrong, but I was actually conditioned to act just like he did – manipulating people, lying, schmoozing, and all the rest. I wanted to be different than him, so I had to reset my thinking. Here's what I did: Whenever I had a decision to make I'd do the exact opposite of what my natural reaction told me to do. Honestly, that's the best I could come up with!

I wanted to be normal so badly, but I wasn't normal – I was extremely dysfunctional. Even as a young kid I envisioned what normal was – television shows such as *The Brady Bunch*, *Andy Griffith Show*, *Petticoat Junction*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Flipper*, *Courtship of Eddie's Father*, *Good Times*, *Bonanza*, *Green Acres* and more were how I thought normal life looked. I'd listen to AM radio and hear these songs that talked about love and friendship and life, and I thought, "That's what normal is." So, I decided to try to be normal like I saw on television and heard on the radio.

Well, my friends, none of that stuff is real. It took me until my senior year in college (yeah, I'm a slow learner) to realize that everything I had believed about normal was absolutely wrong! Talk about having the rug pulled out from underneath you! Simply put, I made wrong decisions about how life worked because I had faulty and damaged thinking. It really screwed me up for a while when I figured out that what I believed for my entire youth was not true. If that's not true, what, exactly then, was true? How do you make good decisions if you don't have a clear sense of truth? Let me share with you what I've learned.

Every decision you make eliminates the opportunity to make a different decision, and every decision you make has its own set of consequences. If you have been damaged by abuse and neglect, chances are good you will struggle seeing all your options, understanding how to prioritize those options to get the best result, and how to identify both the positive and negative short-term and long-term consequences of your decisions. I want to spend the next few minutes giving you some pointers when it comes to making decisions.

### **Learn How to Say NO**

This is perhaps the hardest one for me. While nobody would confuse me as a people pleaser necessarily, secretly I am. I HATE telling people no. But not being able to have a boundary in decision making to tell people “no” means you will say “yes” to things you don’t want to agree to and then get stuck with it. “No” was not a word that many of us were really able to use in foster care. We weren’t able to tell people “no” so we never learned appropriate boundaries. That will follow you into your post-foster care life.

It will mean you will take on extra work at your job; you will buy every magazine some kid is selling for his Cub Scout troop; you will babysit over and over and over again; and basically, people will take advantage of your “good nature” knowing they can ask you for any kind of favor and you’ll say “yes.”

Inside, however, you will become bitter about it, and the consequences of saying “yes” when you should have said “no” become obvious, especially when it comes to money, time, and emotional capital. There is a great book by a guy named Henry Cloud on boundaries you should get if this is an issue for you. I’m still a work in progress to be honest. Even as I was writing this section a friend asked if I could give them a ride to a hospital about an hour away later this week. I would need to stay until her procedure was done and drive her back. I knew I didn’t have the time to do it because of other commitments, but I couldn’t just come out and say, “I can’t do it this time.” I bobbed and weaved trying to figure out some way to say “yes”! It’s pretty ridiculous, but it’s my reality and it may be yours as well. So, we need to learn to say no without feeling any sense of guilt.

### **Don’t Decide Right Away**

I was conditioned in my circumstances to be a *very* quick thinker. The quicker I thought the safer I could be. But as an adult, I don’t actually have to decide on things as quickly as I did as a kid. Unfortunately, I don’t take the advice I’m giving you as often as I should. But when you have time to think through something, take the time!



For example, when I bought my car with 18 percent interest, it was an impulse buy. You may remember reading that one of the consequences of our dysfunction may be impulsiveness and instant gratification. I went to the dealer after work, saw the car, liked it and decided I'd get it. I didn't shop around, I didn't look at other ads, I didn't even go to other lots and look. I saw what I wanted and bought it. The sales guy knew he had a lemming and did what all sales people do: turned on the pressure to make the sale. "The car may not be here next week! In fact, I have two other people looking at it!" What I should have done was taken my time, looked around, and found a car that I could afford at an affordable rate. What I did was drive that car home that night. It was a great car – 1982 Toyota Celica 5-speed hatchback with only about 50,000 miles on it. That car was my baby – I slept in it when I was homeless; it went to the Army with me; it went back to college with me; it even was eventually passed down to one of my nieces. In the end, I think it had 200,000 miles on it! If I remember correctly, the sticker price on it was \$3,500 – at 18 percent interest over four years I paid significantly more! Lesson learned.

There are a lot of decisions that come your way that you actually don't have to make on the spot even though you want to. Take your time. Do not be impulsive. Weigh the short-term and long-term advantages and disadvantages of your decision options. Don't be afraid to walk away from a bad deal. Unless something absolutely has to be decided now, delay the decisions until you think through it.

Those of us who have lived through what we've lived through tend to be highly emotional. That means that we tend to make decisions when we are emotional. And that means we tend to make really bad decisions because decisions made from emotions instead of the facts tend to blow up on us, especially relational decisions

### **Don't Make Emotional Decisions**

Think about a time you made a decision when you were mad.

Go ahead, I'll give you a second.

How did that work out?

Have you ever made a decision when you were sad?

How about when you were jealous or joyful or depressed? How did those decisions work out?

Ever go shopping when you're hungry? Did you notice you bought a bunch of stuff that wasn't on the list and that you didn't need but sounded good as you walked up and down the aisle? That is how we make decisions when we're emotional – we base decisions on how we feel instead of the facts of the situation. And like buying food when we're hungry, chances are the decisions you make won't necessarily be good for you!

The hard part about this advice, at least if I were giving advice to my younger self, is that I was ALWAYS emotional! That was my normal state of mind. How do you make decisions any other way? And that is the trick! You have to learn to think about things logically. Here's how I did it.

Instead of approaching a problem or decision based upon how I thought about it, what I would do is try to look at the situation from the "third person": as if I was just watching it from the outside and someone else were experiencing it. For example, I like to shop at Ross Dress for Less. There is SO much there I could buy on impulse, but I don't. What I do instead is see something I like then emotionally pull back and think, "Do you need this shirt? Don't you already own, like, 10 of these kinds of shirts already?" Then I argue, "Yeah, but it's really cool." Well, it might be, but my third-person voice says, "Yes, but you don't need it." So, I don't buy it. Other times the conversation goes like this. "OMG isn't that the coolest jersey!" Third-person voice says, "YES! You must have it!" Then I'm totally screwed and have to buy it!

That's a funny example, but my life has been full of decisions that were made when I was angry. You say things you shouldn't say; you do things you shouldn't do; you regret things that you shouldn't have said or done; and you really in your heart didn't mean any of it but there's no taking it back. I'm pretty sure you know what I'm talking about.

Our emotions are at their hottest when we are triggered so we have to be absolutely sure that we are not making important decisions in a trigger moment! For example, when your boss has triggered you with his authoritarian way of running the office, and you decide that now is a great time to tell him how you really feel about him, perhaps you ought to wait until your trigger is managed and rethink that idea.

### **Ask for Advice**

This was really hard for the younger me. I thought that if I asked for advice it would show weakness and people take advantage of weakness so I never asked anyone for anything! REALLY dumb mistake on my part. Not that I had a lot of adults to turn to for advice, but I can think of a couple who would have really been helpful in decisions I had to make.

For example, remember that car I bought? One of the adults in my life at the time was a banker in the town in which I was the newspaper editor. His name was Ben Langela; he was one of the most awesome guys I've ever met. A World War II veteran, he took me under his wing when I got the job as the editor and helped me get stories around town. He would have been an excellent mentor or at least someone to bounce off the idea of paying 18 percent interest on a car loan! I didn't ask him for help because I was embarrassed that he would find out that I had bad credit – I did get one of those college credit cards and you know how that worked out! But had I asked Ben to guide me, I'm sure he would have helped me get into a car that fit my budget without me getting taken to the cleaners.

Asking for advice is not a sign of weakness. In fact, it's a sign of maturity. You don't look dumb because you don't know the answer. You look smart because you're seeking counsel before making an important decision. I know there is all sorts of fear associated with reaching out to seek advice. Our experience with people isn't so good in this area. We've been made fun of; we've been humiliated; we've been told we're stupid; we've been made to feel less than everyone else. But we're adults now and the game has changed. People don't get to make us feel that way anymore. We can have proper boundaries to keep that from happening. And yes, there are trusted people out there in your life who would LOVE to give you a hand with the decisions you have to make. You just have to ask. It's worth the risk.

### **Do a Cost-Benefit Analysis**

This is a lot easier than it sounds. You simply take a piece of paper, draw two columns and list on one side the positives of making a certain decision and on the other side the negatives of the decision. Once you have your lists, you compare them to see which decision the best is to make.

I like this exercise because some of us are visual learners and do better if we can see things in black and white. Sometimes trying to keep all this stuff in our head muddles a problem. I'm a guy who likes to make lists. I keep a white board in my office with all the stuff I need to get done on it. I tell people that if it's not on my white board it's not getting done! Certainly, you can create a list in your head of pros and cons, but it will not be as inclusive and in-depth as taking some time to write it all out on a piece of paper. And once you see it on paper decisions sometimes become clearer, especially ones that have emotional investment with it. It makes you take time to analyze the situation less emotionally.

A young woman I know who had grown up in less than ideal circumstances was thinking about heading out to the east coast to hang with some friends there. She was really psyched about it. But I asked her to slow down and do this exercise with me. We mapped out the positives and negatives of the move to include costs, employment, housing, travel, quality of friends, opportunities, lost opportunities, and more. By the time she finished she realized that while it sounded like a lot of fun it would be a bad decision for her at the time. I agreed! She admitted that she probably never would have come to that conclusion on her own without that little exercise. I agreed with that as well. She was emotionally committed to going and even though she probably could have made it work, it was not the best decision for her at the time.

Doing a thoughtful and honest cost-benefit analysis of our decision making is not only common sense, but it can be very enlightening about our thought processes and how to make future decisions.

### **Risk-Reward Quotient**

I had a foster brother who was kind of hell on wheels. He really was a great kid, but he just couldn't help but get himself in trouble. Whether it was sneaking out, drinking, girls, or worse, he couldn't control his impulse for doing dumb stuff.

The funny part was he never thought he'd get caught and he actually got caught EVERY. SINGLE. TIME! You would think he'd learn, but he never did. He was willing to risk so much because he thought the reward was worth the punishment of getting caught. And he paid heavily for his skewed risk/reward quotient.

Then there was Brother Jeff – he was a fraternity brother of mine who was perhaps the greatest salesman of all time! But like my foster brother, Jeff took huge risks in order to reap huge rewards and often paid huge prices when it didn't work out.

How about you? Are you a risk taker? It's pretty relative idea – I don't consider myself a big risk taker; I'm more strategic and calculated. But when I worked at the Pentagon my boss thought I was a huge risk taker compared to the bureaucrats in DC.

I think that as former foster kids we may be willing to risk more than others, because we have a different scale of loss than other people. What I mean by that is I may be willing to risk more than others because what others may see as a big risk I see as a small risk given my scale. I've experienced abuse, neglect, homelessness, abandonment and more. No risk I take is going to put me back there! So, I may risk a little money or some reputation that others may not because those things don't compare to what I would never risk, which is ending back up in my old life! Does that make sense?

But we have to be a bit careful. If you tend to be impulsive, you can actually risk too much because you also may be like my foster brother and be too optimistic about your chances of success! You have to have a good risk-reward quotient, meaning you have to have a good sense of what you're willing to lose every time you risk in case things goes south.

If you're like me, this may come naturally. I tend to plan for the worse but hope for the best. But I do plan for the worst – I wargame all the bad scenarios that could happen and base decisions on whether I'm willing to suffer those consequences should I make the wrong decision. Maybe a weird way to look at things, but it does keep me from making decisions that cost me more than I'm willing to pay!



So, my encouragement to you is to really think through what you are risking with your decisions and if you are willing to pay the price for a bad decision. This is especially important when it comes to money. When you grow up poor you have a tendency to want to buy things for yourself when you have money as an adult. In fact, shopping therapy is a real thing! You actually feel better about yourself and life when you can spend money to get yourself stuff!

But you have to be a bit careful because money has a way of burning a hole in your pocket and once it's gone it's gone! I've seen people make impulse buys and then not be able to pay rent. I've seen people put things on payment plans, such as furniture, because they are certain they can pay it off but then have it repossessed because they were wrong. I've seen people get into housing they really like even though it's clear their income will never support their cost of living. Then they are kicked out after about six months when they are short on rent each month. And, a lot of us have significant debt loads because our buying habits outpace our income. All of this is bad both in the short run and long run. But it happens because we don't examine the risks we are taking honestly.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying don't take risks. I believe that without risk there is no gain! You have to risk something to gain something. But you also have to be smart about what you are risking. If you're thinking about doing something because you don't think you'll get caught, you're thinking is wrong. If you're thinking about doing something because you are certain that it will work out, you're not actually planning for the worst-case scenario and are perhaps too optimistic.

Here's the rule of thumb: In whatever you do know there is a 50/50 chance it will fail. If it fails, what are you willing to risk? If the risk is too high, move on to another option. If the risk is manageable, move forward. If you are unsure, don't do it.

### **Don't Always Think You're Right**

Remember that part in the adolescence possible effects of maltreatment section a few pages back? There was an entry that really caught my eye: "May overcompensate for negative self-esteem by being narcissistic, unrealistically self-complimentary; grandiose expectations for self." Boy, I wish I had known *that* about this 35 years ago!!

If you suffer with that the way I did it can really mess up your decision making! You actually think you can do *anything!* And here's the scary part: If you are competent and perform well it only feeds the fire that you are the center of the universe and invincible! Here's the downside: you turn into an arrogant jerk who hurts people and you make decisions that just feed your megalomania instead of help you grow.

According to *Psychology Today*, Narcissistic Personality Disorder exhibits with the following symptoms:

- Exaggerates own importance
- Preoccupied with fantasies of success, power, beauty, intelligence or ideal romance
- Belies he/she is special and can only be understood by other special people or institutions
- Requires constant attention and admiration from others
- Has unreasonable expectations of favorable treatment
- Takes advantage of others to reach his/her own goals
- Disregards the feelings of others; lacks empathy
- Is often envious of others or believes other people are envious of him/her
- Shows arrogant behaviors and attitudes<sup>[11]</sup>

Here's one the list didn't include: When you fail, it's always someone else's fault – you can never be wrong.

If you struggle with this the way I did, you'll never see it in yourself. You will have all sorts of justifications and reasons why you're right and everyone else around you is wrong. But if people around you are telling you that you're exhibiting these symptoms, go get help!! This is one of the most insidious decision killers we have. Imagine making decisions without caring how it will affect another person, using people to get what you want, and based on exaggerated ideals. Those decisions are going to cost you! Trust me, I know what I'm talking about!

A healthy self-image includes the ability to admit when you are wrong and manage that emotion in an appropriate way that includes learning from the mistake and making amends for anyone whom you hurt in the process. If you can't admit you're wrong, you have a problem and your decisions will reflect that problem through a reputation of arrogance, selfishness, condescendence, belittling people, using people, and more. You won't be trusted, you won't be liked, and people will not be loyal to you – fundamental building blocks we need as former foster kids.

Do yourself a favor and address this one if it's a problem. Learn how to be right graciously and wrong humbly.

### **Know What Is and Is Not Your Responsibility**

As foster kids, sometimes we were put in positions where we were responsible for stuff that wasn't ours at way too young an age. For example, I was changing my mother's bed pan at four or five years old. Some of you may have been taking care of a younger sibling as a pre-teen yourself. Maybe you had to work to support the family as a teen, with all your earnings going to pay household bills because of an out-of-work parent or one who just wouldn't work. Whatever the case may be, these kinds of misplaced responsibilities can lead you into a place as an adult where you either reject responsibility because you burn out on it or you take on more responsibility than is yours and burn out because of that! Both are bad and will cause you to make costly decisions. Let's deal with them one at a time.

### *Rejecting Responsibility*

One of the things that is most freeing about aging out of the foster care system is we can throw off the yoke that has been around our necks for years. If you've been forced to take on responsibility that wasn't yours it will be one of the things you throw off! But that pendulum can swing too far and you can throw off all responsibility because you are overly stressed by all the responsibility you had and now you just want a break.

Unfortunately, responsibility doesn't end when we age out, it just changes. It's true that we no longer have to do the things we did while in the system. We are free from that! But we now have different responsibilities that include:

- Finding and keeping a job
- Finding and keeping housing
- Paying monthly bills (utilities, transportation, food)
- Developing healthy relationships
- Taking care of others (spouse, children)
- Seeking help for your dysfunction
- If attending college, going to class, studying and doing homework
- Saving money

I met a young man a few months ago outside a restaurant. He couldn't have been more than about 22 years old and was homeless. I'm always stunned when I see a young, healthy guy being homeless. Unless they are mentally challenged, they can work, go to school and be productive. There is no reason for him to be homeless. I struck up a conversation with him and found him to be pretty smart and well-spoken. So, I had to ask, "What's the deal? Why are you homeless?" He told me that he loved the lifestyle! He wasn't responsible for anything, he could work when he wanted to and didn't have to work when he didn't want to. Nobody could tell him what to do. He could travel around the country and just be free. You might be surprised how many homeless people actually *choose* that lifestyle! I don't know if the guy was a former foster kid or not, but I get his point. But what kind of life is that? Living off the charity of others, not really taking care of yourself, and just existing with no goals or purpose. That is not what you were made for and it's not why you got yourself through foster care!

As tempting as it is just to shut down, you will end up a government statistic if you do. You must shift your mindset from foster kid to independent adult. Instead of having responsibilities placed upon you with no input, you now get to choose and embrace the responsibilities that you want, including being able to say “no” as we previously discussed. I don’t know what foster kid dreams of aging out so that they can be on welfare, live in subsidized housing, and be uneducated and unemployed. That is not our dream! But it is where you will end up if you don’t shift to adult responsibilities.

Yes, adulting is hard! There is stress involved with having a job, paying the bills, being married and having kids and all that goes with it. However, there is reward that goes with it as well. You get paid for working! You get vacations! You get nice things such as cars and homes and 4K televisions. You get a spouse to help you through everything. You may get kids who you will love unconditionally unlike your experience. There is so much more reward than pain in this kind of responsibility that you actually can enjoy going to work and paying the bills!

Don’t give up just because you’ve had a bad experience in foster care. As an adult, you get to rewrite the rules a bit and this time you get rewarded for your efforts!

*Taking Too Much Responsibility*

There is an exercise I give people who struggle with taking too much responsibility. I call it, “Whose Rocks Are You Carrying?” Imagine you have a backpack (rucksack if you’re military) and you are filling it with rocks. Some of the rocks—responsibilities—are yours. But you see a good size rock over there that belongs to someone else and you pick it up and put it in. Then you see another rock that belongs to a different friend and you put that one in.

Suddenly you realize that you have picked up all the rocks around you – yours and everyone else’s – and your backpack is full, it’s super heavy, and it’s weighing you down so much that you can’t move forward. That’s what it’s like when we take on other people’s responsibilities and make them our own. The exercise has you identify which rocks are yours and which are other people’s and then decide which rocks you really should be carrying and which ones you should be taking out of your pack and putting back on the ground!

I know we can feel guilty if we don’t carry another person’s stuff. But we have to ask ourselves a fundamental question: Is this really my responsibility?

If the answer is no, then you have two choices: You can take it out of your pack and leave it where it belongs, or you can decide that you’ll carry it anyway if the reason is appropriate. Let me give you some examples.



I have a sister who lives in an apartment about an hour away from me. Her landlord told her for some reason that she cannot have a window air conditioner (AC), which she has. It's the middle of summer and while it doesn't get Arizona kind of hot, it does get warm and she would be without AC making it very uncomfortable for her. That's really not my problem to be honest. But it was a rock I wanted to pick up. I feel some responsibility to help out my family so I picked up a portable indoor AC unit for her so she won't melt this summer.

Here's a rock I didn't pick up. I mentor a kid who my wife and I love dearly. He just turned 18 years old today as I write this section. Recently, he has been going through a rough patch and decided to move two hours south of here to live with a friend's family. Not the best decision in my mind, but I get his reasons. A couple weeks ago he was pinging me asking if I would come down and pick up he and his buddy to come back to town here so he could hang out and do some things. It would be a two-hour drive down and a two-hour drive back. I have some health issues that make that difficult and I have a pretty busy schedule. While I like helping this young man, I told him "no," I wasn't going to do that. I told him that he really needed to get a job and his driver's license so he could take care of himself now that he's made the decision to move south. Given his decision to move, I did not feel his transportation need is a rock I want to carry so I didn't.

We all have decisions to make about which rocks we carry and which we don't. People will try to get you to carry their rocks by making you feel guilty or promising to help you out later if you help them today. Don't fall for it. If you carry all the rocks that others want you to carry not only will your pack get full but you won't have room for your own rocks you have to carry and things will fall through the cracks!

This really has to do with self-care. You need to take care of yourself first because if you're not healthy you really can't help someone else. There has to be a balance here. So, my advice is this. Take an inventory of your rocks by using the worksheet on the next page. Be honest and separate them into which you should be carrying and which you shouldn't. And then purge the rocks that shouldn't be in your pack. You'll feel SO much lighter and will be able to move forward in more ease than when you were carrying rocks that were not yours.

### **Whose Rocks Are You Carrying?**

In life, there are things for which we are absolutely responsible. Things we must own. But there are also things we don't own – they belong to someone else. Unfortunately, many people end up carrying other people's rocks – taking responsibility for things that are not theirs to own. Conversely, sometimes people don't actually take ownership of the stuff that is theirs. This exercise is about an honest assessment of whose rocks you're carrying. In column one, write down the issues in your life for which you are responsible – be honest. In column two, write down issues you are carrying that actually do not belong to you, but are someone else's issue. In column three, write down how you are going to deal with either your issues in column one or letting go of issues that are not yours in column two.



I like to ask groups with whom I'm speaking who they talk to the most in their lives. The answer is themselves! Then I ask them if what they are saying to themselves is mostly positive or mostly negative. Overwhelmingly it's negative. As abused kids, chances are good you heard a lot of negative things about yourself from others during your childhood. This negative barrage sticks with us, giving us a negative self-image as well as negative self-talk. It can become a problem in our decision making that we have to address.

How many opportunities do you think you missed because you didn't think you were smart enough, good enough, worthy enough, courageous enough, educated enough or or inadequate in some other way? My wife and I were with a woman just last night who is brilliant, funny, capable and has both an undergraduate degree and Master's degree. Yet, she only applies for jobs such as executive assistant or as she put it, "things I know I can do and less." The negative self-talk in her head has convinced her not to apply for jobs for which she is certainly qualified, which in turn will leave her underpaid, underchallenged, underemployed, and unsatisfied.

Negative self-talk is a real thing, and it affects our decision making by causing us to look at life through a glass-is-half-empty prism. What I mean by that is, we tend to see everything through the prism of the negative comments we make and believe about ourselves! For the most part, it's everyday little things, but it can be bigger things with more significant consequences as well.

Here are just a handful of areas where we may deny ourselves on a daily basis:

- You won't spend a little money on yourself because you didn't earn it or aren't worth it.
- You won't go out with friends after work because you know they really don't like you and are just being nice by asking you to go.
- You won't date because you're convinced you're ugly and nobody can love you.
- You don't ask for a raise during your annual review even though the boss thinks you do a great job because you don't feel as if you do that great of a job.
- Your friends invite you out for a movie that you've been wanting to see but you decline because you're sure you really won't have much fun.
- You're with a group on a Saturday night but feel isolated and as if you don't really fit in so you sneak out without anyone noticing.

There are major decisions that could be affected by negative self-talk as well!

- You turn down the marriage proposal because you're sure that you can't make the person happy for the rest of their lives.
- You don't take the major promotion because you don't think you can really do the job even though you've actually been doing it for years.
- You decide not to have children because you're convinced you'd be a lousy parent after the experience you've had as a kid.
- You don't buy a house and decide to rent for the rest of your life because you are afraid you'll not be able to pay your mortgage and lose your investment.

You get the idea. Negative self-talk actually is fear-based decision making. When confronted with a decision, your mind plays out the worst-case scenario and then convinces you that *you* would screw it up so you shouldn't even try.

I worked with this great guy who had been an alcoholic for 20 years. A group of us got together with him weekly and started rebuilding him. He actually was sober for five months and got a job for the first time in two decades! It was a miracle! Then he decided that things were going too well and that he didn't deserve all the good things coming his way so he got hammered and went to work drunk so he'd get fired. He sabotaged himself because of the negative self-talk in his head. It was tragic to watch because he could have turned his life completely around in that moment had he just made the right decision to stick to the plan.

I don't think any of us can completely get that negative self-talk out of our heads, but we need to have an appropriate view of ourselves. Of course, there are times we are knuckleheads and deserve to chew ourselves out. But most the time our view of ourselves is not as negative as we believe. On the next page is an exercise I use for people stuck in a negative self-talk loop. Go ahead and give it a try and see where you come out!

## How to Make a Good Decision

Before we get to the exercise, though, I want to talk about what a good decision looks like. We've seen areas that will affect the decisions we make, but here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind that will help you make appropriate decisions in all circumstances.

- Don't lie – lies always come back to haunt you
- Don't cheat – you'll eventually get caught
- Don't steal – you may get away with it, but it's wrong and you know it
- Avoid hurting others if at all possible
- Have personal boundaries
- Be careful not to have unreasonable expectations – set them too high and you'll be disappointed
- Tell the truth but gently not like a hammer
- Care about yourself
- Care about others as much as you care about yourself
- Respect and treat others as you would like to be respected and treated



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- Be willing to do things that you don't really want to do but must be done
- Don't take things personally – personalizing comments and actions of others allows them to control your feelings and ultimately your decisions
- Believe in yourself but have a realistic view of your abilities
- Learn from your mistakes
- Take responsibility for your actions
- If you screw up, admit it
- Don't hold a grudge – it will negatively color your decisions
- Take care of yourself – when you get run down or burned out you make worse decisions
- Don't make decisions based on emotions good or bad
- Have a plan and have a backup plan
- Plan for the worse but work for the best
- Trust but verify – it's okay to trust people, it really is! But verify what they say and do
- Don't question people's motives – when you start doing that it will negatively affect your decision making

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- Forgive everyone even if they don't deserve it – it takes too much energy to stay mad and it allows others to affect your decisions
- Apologize when you do wrong – the bigger person always apologizes first
- Don't burn bridges – you never know when you'll need to cross it in the future
- Don't give up the great for the good – don't settle for mediocre
- Sometimes good enough is good enough – don't insist on perfection that is unattainable
- Take calculated risks based on good strategy – don't leap before you look
- Don't let your past dictate your future
- Work the plan and the plan will work – once you commit to something follow through
- Keep your promises – your reputation is really all you have
- Lead, follow or get out of the way
- Stay focused on the mission or goal at hand – don't allow yourself to get distracted
- Work hard and have integrity
- Live within your means
- Control your impulses – you don't have to act on every impulse you have
- Make good life choices – don't allow your desires to overcome your potential
- God gave you a brain, use it!



In this chapter, I've given you some food for thought. We are all different with different experiences, so not everything written will universally apply. However, my hope is that the conversation spurs you to think about your unique circumstances and how you make decisions, how you want to make decisions, and what, if any, changes you have to make to get to where you want to be in your decision making.

I know a lot about bad decisions! After I aged out of the system, I was so ill-prepared for the kinds of decisions I had to make that I lost everything important to me, because of my inability to make a rational and informed decision. Instead, I was impulsive, narcissistic, arrogant, risk-taking and foolish. I would save you that experience by really encouraging you to think about what we've talked about here and how you can become a better decision maker!

### **Chapter 4 - Welcome to the Real World**

Aging out can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we're ecstatic to be free from the system and no longer be a piece of property known as a "ward of the court." On the other, it's terrifying. Unlike our peers, we have no safety net. There is no mommy or daddy to come home to if we fail. There is nobody to bail us out if we get in trouble. We are on our own and as we've learned, we're probably pretty damaged and ill-prepared for what we will be facing.

When you finish high school and leave foster care (most do at 18 but some stay until 21), the world awaits you! You basically have three options: Go to college to pursue a four-year degree; go to community college or vocational school to learn a skill; go directly into the workforce. Whichever path you choose, you have to have some preparation if you're going to be successful. Let me walk you through what I learned both by failing miserably and through my successes in these areas.

#### **Setting the Stage**

Aged out foster kids have a serious battle ahead of them when they hit the streets. I've done a little research to set the stage for you so you can see what we're up against.

According to one study, we run a good chance of becoming homeless.

“Among the populations at greatest risk for becoming homeless are the 25 000 to 30 000 youths who age out of foster care each year when they turn 18 or, in some states, 21. Unlike many of their peers who continue to live with or receive financial assistance from their parents, these youths often struggle just to keep themselves housed. A review of research published between 1990 and 2011 has suggested that between 11% and 36% of the youths who age out of foster care become homeless during the transition to adulthood. By comparison, approximately 4% of the nationally representative sample of youths aged 18 to 26 years who participated in the third wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reported ever being homeless.

“Youths who become homeless after aging out of foster care appear to experience many of the same problems as other homeless youths and young adults, including high rates of mental health disorders, a high risk of physical or sexual victimization, and a lack of access to health care services.” [\[12\]](#)

We also run the risk of being incarcerated! A 2014 research paper noted that certain foster kids are more likely to commit crimes than their non-foster care peers. “We find that men who were placed in foster care as children are 10 percentage points (23%) more likely to be convicted of a crime as adults than their investigated but never-placed counterparts. For females the point estimates are not statistically different from zero. Our subsample regressions clearly show that it is boys who are placed in foster care during adolescence (ages 13–18) that account for the association between placement in foster care and adult criminality. For this subgroup, the placed children are on average 25 percentage points (55%) more likely to commit at least one crime as an adult.”<sup>[13]</sup>

According to Foster Care 2.0, “Almost 80 percent of inmates incarcerated in our prisons have spent time in foster care.”<sup>[14]</sup> Other statistics from their website include:

- 40-50% of former foster youth become homeless within 18 months after leaving care.
- 60% of youth earn incomes below the poverty line.
- Only 1-3% graduate from college.
- 25% of foster youth will be in prison within two years of emancipation.
- They are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at six times the general population and double the rate of veterans returning from war.
- Eight of ten (81 percent) males have been arrested compared to 17 percent of their peers who were not in foster care.

Here is the one that is most disturbing to me. Of the 100,000 kids who are sex trafficked in America, 60% have been in the child welfare system – in other words, 60,000 of these 100,000 kids were foster kids at some point!<sup>[15]</sup>

The numbers are pretty bleak and from my vantage point it's because foster kids are not well-prepared by the system to become independent by the time they age out. Personally, I received absolutely no education, training, or help from the child welfare department or my case worker prior to leaving the system. I was on my own. And I was homeless within 18 months; I earned less than the poverty line; I struggled significantly in college (but did eventually graduate) and could have gone to jail had I actually been caught do some of the things I did, which thankfully I never was.

What does your story look like? Anything like this?

The fact is many kids aging out of foster care today really have no clue what they're about to face. Many don't know how to fill out a job application, write a resume or do a job interview, more or less apply for college and financial aid! This means they will be working menial jobs for low pay even if they are smart enough to do more significant work. I don't know about your state, but in Oregon minimum wage jobs are not a living wage, so unless the kid has roommates to share expenses, they'll be couch surfing or living in a car like I did.



Adulting is hard enough when you know what you're doing; it can be overwhelming when you have absolutely no idea, are hampered by mental health issues, are self-medicating to get by, are struggling just to make ends meet, are constantly triggered, and don't know how to make good decisions. You can clearly see the hurdles a foster kid has to jump in order to make it once they leave the system. Here are some more statistics just to drive the point home. These are from the National Foster Youth Institute:

- More than 23,000 children will age out of the US foster care system every year.
- 75% of women and 33% of men receive government benefits to meet basic needs after they age out of the system.
- 7 out of 10 girls who age out of the foster care system will become pregnant before the age of 21.
- 1 out of every 2 kids who age out of the system will develop a substance dependence.
- Only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.
- Nearly 60% of young men who age out of the foster care system and are legally emancipated have been convicted of a crime.
- About 1 in 4 kids who age out of the system will not graduate from high school or be able to pass their GED.<sup>[16]</sup>

To say we have an uphill battle when we age out of foster care is a significant understatement. The fact is we are pretty much throw-away people in our society in which we were abused, warehoused, discarded when we aged out, and left for dead. Don't believe me? Here are the stats:

- Adolescents who had been in foster care were nearly two and a half times more likely to seriously consider suicide than other youth (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).
- Adolescents who had been in foster care were nearly four times more likely to have attempted suicide than other youth (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).
- Experiencing childhood abuse or trauma increased the risk of attempted suicide 2- to 5-fold (Dube et al., 2001).
- Among 8-year-olds who were maltreated or at risk for maltreatment, nearly 10% reported wanting to kill themselves (Thompson, 2005).
- Adverse childhood experiences play a major role in suicide attempts. One study found that approximately two thirds of suicide attempts may be attributable to abusive or traumatic childhood experiences (Dube et al., 2001).<sup>[17]</sup>

The horse that I am beating to death here is this: We are not prepared to leave foster care for independent living when we age out. Every statistic from every study proves it. Yet, every day kids are kicked out of their foster homes into oblivion. It is no wonder we struggle so much immediately after foster care and honestly for the rest of our lives.

This is the state we're in when we enter college or the workforce. Who in their right mind would think we could be successful under such circumstances? Yet, there are only a handful of options – succeed, become homeless and use social welfare services, go to jail, or die.

### College

Let me tackle college life first. The National Foster Youth Institute reports that 70 percent of foster kids want to attend college, yet less than 3 percent actually graduate.<sup>[18]</sup> Why is college so hard for foster kids? This is just my take.

When you get to college you're usually thrown into a dorm with a bunch of other kids. For me, it felt like another foster home. A room to live in that wasn't mine, in a place I didn't know, living with a roommate who was a stranger with the expectation that I would just "adjust" to it normally like everyone else.

If that wasn't triggering enough, the normal freshman process is getting to know everyone on your dorm floor, build relationship with them, and be friends. As you will see in more detail in a coming chapter on relationships, this can be excruciatingly hard for a former foster kid. You're already triggered being in this new living environment and now you have to play nice with all these strangers none of whom can actually relate to anything you have experienced in your life. If you're like me, you'll find them immature and annoying with no real-life experience, just coddled by mommy and daddy.

That's just the first day!

Next is the classroom. College is very different than high school. In high school, your teachers, counselors, and administration worked really hard to help you graduate. In college, that's not their job. It's all on you to figure out how to take notes, how to study, how to read volumes of material, how to take college-level tests that include essay writing and more. Sink or swim, you're immediately thrown in the deep end of the pool. They don't care if you have a learning disability; they don't care you were abused; they don't care if you were in foster care. Their job is to teach the stuff and your job is to prove you learned it. Period.

I remember one of my first classes at the University of Missouri my freshman year. I was only at Mizzou for a semester before the money ran out, and I had to come home and eventually transfer to the University of Oregon, but those first days stuck with me! I walk into a lecture hall – hundreds of other freshmen were there. I'm sitting up in the nose-bleed section of the room and the professor comes in, introduces the class, goes over the syllabus and launches into the lecture. My job was to take furious notes and see if I could keep up. I was a great student in high school, but this was different. This was all on me, a kid who couldn't read or write until the 4th grade! I was grateful to end my first semester with a 2.65 GPA! Now to be fair, it didn't help that I joined a fraternity and was self-medicating like crazy to try to fit in. But I was woefully unprepared for the college experience.

There was another problem I faced. The profs just didn't care about you. Do you think that might trigger you a bit? Imagine going to this adult authority figure who is supposed to have your best interest at heart and confiding in them that you were struggling only to have them blow you off, tell you to talk with some graduate teaching fellow (GTF) who also doesn't have time to see you. Think you might feel abandoned, slighted, humiliated, and worthless?

This isn't the only triggering you'll get from your college professors. Many of them can be kind of arrogant. They flaunt their authority at times in ways that are inappropriate. I say this because it's what I experienced and now that I am a college professor I still see it on campus, and I make dang sure I never do that to any of my students! Think about someone in authority holding it over your head. Think that might trigger some emotions in you? Was part of your abuse from someone in authority holding you emotionally or physically hostage in some way? It happens in college as well – in a different way but one that will trigger those old wounds.

The problem with triggering while in college is this: While you were a foster kid, you didn't push back – you couldn't or else you'd risk being sent to Juvenile Detention Hall (JDH) or placed with a different family. So, we took it, and we took it, and we took it. Now you get to college. You're an adult and emancipated from the system.

Guess what? You finally get to push back! In my case, I was so angry about everything that I pushed back every chance I got. I had a zero-tolerance for bullying, people using their authority over me, threats, or any of that stuff. Clearly my pendulum had swung too far the opposite way; anything I perceived as an injustice was met with aggression and a willingness to fight intellectually or otherwise!

I had a professor at the University of Oregon who just hated me. Our politics were different; he was old and near retirement; I was young and arrogant and I wouldn't kiss his ring or his butt. He made my life at the School of Journalism miserable. He failed me on papers that clearly were passable. He accused me of plagiarizing another person's work, which he knew I didn't do. When I suffered a concussion from kickboxing and couldn't see out of my right eye or speak for two weeks, he told me that it was too late to drop his course, and I guess I'd just get an F. Dude was a first-class jerk. But I didn't help matters by fighting against his authority, trying to get him fired, and bad mouthing him all over the place. Simply put, he triggered me in some ways by bullying me, and I wasn't going to stand for it. He gave me a D in his course even though I had clearly earned a better grade.

This is the kind of stuff that can happen in college to foster kids. We get triggered by relationships, we get triggered by the hierarchical authority of the place, we get triggered by the bullying, we get triggered by any number of things and instead of cowering like little children, for the first times in our lives we can fight back!

But it's a trap!

You see, some authority is good. Some rules are meant to be followed. It is up to us to succeed. You get out of something what you put in. You have to focus and work really hard. You can't fight the system and expect to win. Just like foster care, you have to play by their rules, and just like foster care, their rules can suck. However, if you hope to achieve success in college, you must do it their way. You must check their boxes. You must suck it up, keep your mouth shut, and just do the work no matter whether you like the professor, the course, or the learning or not. Many foster kids don't succeed in college because the first two years are just general education courses that have little to nothing to do with why you're in college. The idea is to give you a well-rounded education. But it's very difficult to first stay interested in those courses; second, do well in courses in which you are not interested; and, third, acclimate to the college experience while taking courses that probably work to our weaknesses instead of strengths, such as writing, communication, history (memorization), economics, and math.

However, it can be done! You just have to have enormous discipline – much more than your peers because you are dealing with a lot more moving parts than they are! College is so important and today there are more opportunities than ever for foster kids to attend college.

In Oregon, foster kids attend college for free! I sure wish they had that when I aged out! There are online courses everywhere! There are technical schools, vocational schools, community colleges, universities and more. My advice is this: take it slow. Don't feel as if you need to finish college right away. Start by taking a part-time class load to get used to what college is like. Go to a full-time class load when you are comfortable. It's not a race to get a degree – take your time and do it at your own pace. If you struggle, and you will, get peer mentoring – there are upper classmen who tutor nowadays who honestly do a better job explaining this stuff than the professors do. Don't give up the dream of college just because it's hard! Be prepared, however, for what you will face. Know your triggers, have tools to keep them in check, and work hard – you can make it!

### **Work**

Whether you go right into the workforce after high school or do so after college, work is a different beast you have to tame. Like college, work will trigger you in ways that make holding a job very difficult. It's important that you pick the right line of work and the right company for which to work if you want to be successful. I wish I knew coming out of college what I know now! I would have done a lot of things very differently.

Here's a short list of things that can trigger you in the workplace:



**Bosses:** Again, you may be dealing with a hierarchical workplace where the boss is king and you are a peasant. Clearly that will trigger stuff in you, especially when the boss does boss things like boss you around!

**Co-Workers:** People can be really irritating. Not only will some of your co-workers not do their work and expect you to cover for them, but they will gossip, they will group up into cliques, they will backstab you, blame you for things you didn't do, and they will feign friendship so long as it's useful to them. I'm not saying every co-worker is like this. Some are outstanding! But some are, well, problematic. This stuff will trigger you as well.

**Customers:** Whether you're in a business that sells a product or provides a service, customers are the life blood of the company but they also are the bane of your existence. They never seem happy, they always complain, many try to get one over on you wanting something for nothing, and they're always going over your head when you're not giving them the answer they want.

**Corporate Culture:** Some corporations have a lousy culture. They don't care about their employees or their morale, they lack integrity and intellectual honesty, and there are injustices within the organization whether it be the boss's kid who gets an undeserved promotion or you losing out on a bonus because you're the low-man on the totem pole. Corporate culture can trigger justice issues in you causing you to tear your hair out!

There is more but you get the general idea. The workplace can be very difficult. Personally, I have a 30-year track record of switching jobs every two to three years because I couldn't put up with bad bosses, annoying co-workers, whiney customers and ugly corporate cultures. It's part of my PTSD and lack of relational acuity. I will say I got better – my last full-time gig I was with the same agency for seven and a half years – I held four different positions during that time, but I stayed with (and rose within) the company!

Working is hard because again nobody prepares a foster kid for the rigors of work. Foster kids are too busy just trying to survive to understand the demands of the workplace that include:

- High expectations of competency
- Competition from others who want your job
- Performance based judgments on a daily basis
- Loyalty that really only works one way – up
- High workloads that require extra hours
- Covering for low-producers in your unit in order to meet the mission
- Unfair working conditions
- Sometimes low pay and benefits that are not commensurate with the work performed

Personally, I LOVE work. It was a way to self-medicate. I was a workaholic – the busier the better! I excelled at work because I dedicated myself to the cause everywhere I worked. I bought into the mission, and strove to be in leadership, and I gave 100 percent every single day I was on the job. Perhaps I was more prepared for work than others because my father went to jail because he wouldn't work and instead was a scam artist who would rather cheat someone than hold a job. I'm sure this influenced my hyper sense of responsibility, accountability, and work ethic.

But as we saw from the statistics, many aged out foster kids have a hard time with work. As much as I loved the work, I really struggled with the organizations, the structures and the people. My PTSD was constantly being triggered and it was only because I understood my triggers and had management tools for them that I was able to hold a job at all! Let me share a really bizarre story with you from my first job out of college just to show you how nuts I really was!

I had landed a job as the editor of a weekly newspaper in the San Francisco Bay area. My paper was one of four owned by a family. I wasn't their first choice, but the guy they hired quit a week later so I was called in. I should have known that if a guy quit in a week I probably didn't want that job, but I was desperate to be a newspaper editor so I jumped at the chance.

The boss wasn't the worst I would ever have, but he certainly wasn't the best either. Although I had gone to college for Journalism, I was entirely unprepared to take over a professional weekly newspaper. My page layouts sucked, my management of the staff was worse. I made every mistake known to supervising people. The only thing that was saving my bacon was the fact that I was a dang good reporter. I could write and do so extremely well under the pressure of tight deadlines. I also had a knack for editing to make another person's articles better.

One day my boss, the publisher, invited me out for drinks after work. Of course, I didn't trust the guy – I wasn't healthy in that area of my life yet. In fact, I was convinced that he was going to try to harm me in some way and inviting me out for drinks was just a set up. It was about 75 degrees, and I put on this leather biker jacket I had. On the inside of the jacket I taped every weapon I owned – knives, throwing stars, a club. I wasn't going down without a fight!

Turns out he just wanted to get to know me better over drinks. I'm sure he thought it odd I would wear my heavy biker jacket throughout the evening. Doh!

It's a funny story now, but I tell it because you may experience the same kind of thing. You may perceive your work world through your dysfunctional eyes and misread things so badly that you potentially make a fool of yourself! I didn't understand anything I was going through back then. PTSD was a pretty new term and nobody around me really tried to intervene on my behalf to tell me that I might be nuts, save one person who I really didn't listen to closely enough.

So, here's the deal with work: You may have to fake it for a while until you make it. What I mean by that is you have to learn the culture, relationships and flow of a place and work to fit into it even if you don't until the time comes when you are more comfortable in it. That means a bit of compromise on your part. Here's what you need to control to help fit into a workplace:

- Justice Issues: You can't fight every perceived injustice; you have to let some things go.
- Relationships: You have to respect everyone with whom you work even if they don't earn it or deserve it.
- Do as Your Told: Some work environments are pretty strict in terms of top-down management. Don't argue, just do as your told.
- Pick Your Battles: You don't need to defend yourself every time you feel slighted.
- Go the Extra Mile: Do more than you're asked; help others if you can.
- Integrity: NEVER compromise your integrity for any reason. However, understand the difference between integrity (things you'd never compromise) and opinions and positions which are always negotiable.

To be a good employee should be really easy for former foster kids because employers want from us what we want from everyone else: trust, loyalty, respect, integrity, honesty, and hard work. We should ROCK at work, but we don't because our triggers get in the way! If you're entering the workforce and you've not done some counseling to address your dysfunction, you're really going to be swimming upstream. As much as I love work, I struggled my first years in the workforce, because I didn't understand how to control my triggers and outbursts, which caused me to leave good jobs for no good reason. Later in life, I've been much more successful because I do control those things that in my youth caused me to tell people to take a hike!

Here is the one thing, though, I wish I knew when I first got out of college. The most important question someone like us can ask during a job interview when it's our turn to ask questions is this: Is your management style collegial or hierarchical? Collegial means people work together on teams to accomplish the mission. Hierarchical means there is a boss directing everyone to do the work to make him look good when you accomplish the mission. With how my PTSD exhibits, I NEVER should have taken a job with a hierarchical management structure. I should have always worked in teams!

That's not to say I couldn't do it. I served in the Army and worked at the Defense Department for goodness sake – there is no more hierarchical structure than that! But I MUCH prefer collegial work where you're not getting bossed around, everyone has value, everyone's opinion is respected regardless of rank, and the goal is completing the mission not personal glory or accolades.

That said, all work is the same in this way: it's really not about you, it's about the mission, the company, profits, the shareholders, the customer and the boss. This in and off itself can trigger you as well, because it can feel empty, unjust, and as if you are being used. You have to resist that thinking so you don't get triggered and end up making the mistake of quitting a good job for no good reason or getting let go because of your attitude or outbursts. Think of work this way – it's a contract. You agree to do whatever your job is and they agree to pay you a wage based on that work. That's it. That's the foundation of work. If you have a great job in a great company with awesome bosses and co-workers, that's a bonus! But if you have a so-so job with an okay company with marginal bosses and co-workers, that's okay, too. Here's the thing: You have to work! If you don't work you don't eat or pay your rent or have electricity or any other necessity. Work is not an option so you have to learn how to manage your triggers in the workplace so that you can keep your job!

### **Conclusion**

Whether you go to college or right into the workforce after you age out, you will be confronted by a world that triggers you. The people with whom you interact will trigger you. The things you will be asked to do will trigger you. The environments you are in will trigger you. Everything around you is a potential trigger. This is why I am stressing the importance of identifying your triggers, determining how you react to them, replacing them with an appropriate action and making that new action the habit. If you can't do this you will find yourself moving from job to job until you get to the point where your resume clearly shows you can't hold a position and nobody else will hire you because you are an employment risk!

If you go to college and don't have some control over your triggers, you will fail your classes, fail socially in your various circles, have significant difficulties in personal relationships, and not actually earn your degree. Remember only 1-3% of foster kids complete college – those numbers indicate that those who succeed must be extremely dedicated, motivated, focused and disciplined to make it. In other words, their triggers are not interfering with their school work.



This is a short glimpse into post-foster care college and work. It's certainly not a comprehensive look at all the ins and outs of either environment, but it is meant to give you a sense of the difficulties you could face when you engage these environments when you age out. As you are well aware, life is difficult and it is exceedingly difficult when you are an emotional wreck but are expected to perform at a high level without the support you had while in the system. But take heart – you can do it!

## Chapter 5 - Five Pillars of Relationship

Relationships are so important in our lives that I'm going to spend an entire chapter talking about how our trauma experiences screwed us up relationally and how we can manage relationships as adults. But a disclaimer first: I'm no expert in this, just a work in progress.

There are five pillars on which relationships stand: Trust, Loyalty, Love, Friendship, and Respect. If you've been in foster care, at least one of these, if not all five of these, have been violated in your life. And when I say violated, I don't mean some everyday offense, I mean major betrayals that are emotionally crippling. Things such as a parent saying he/she loves you and then beats you. Being abandoned in a strange place with no way to seek help. Constant lies from those in positions of trust. Being barraged by negative comments about how worthless you are and how you'll never amount to anything. These types of things happen routinely in the lives of the abused and have a lasting effect.

The truth is that those of us who were in foster care crave relationship. We want nothing more than someone to really love us for who we are. Yet, sometimes we've had to hide that part of us literally for survival!

Because of our past betrayals and circumstances, we are fearful of relationships or incredibly cautious at a minimum. Unfortunately, two things happen relationally when you suffer abuse and neglect: First, you struggle to trust others in relationship; second, you act toward others as you were acted upon. In other words, the abused become abusers.

I'm going to take a few moments and run through what I call the five pillars of relationship and see if I can connect some dots regarding the problems we may face in adult relationships.

### **Trust**

This is so obvious I feel a little silly even writing about it. But here goes: When someone violates our trust, we tend to project that violation on everyone else we see whether they are trustworthy or not! Further, we tend to find the smallest infractions of trust so that we can have a self-fulfilled prophecy, "Aha! See, I told you I couldn't trust you!"

Trust issues have HUGE consequences in relationships, especially intimate relationships. If you do not or cannot trust the person you are with you will experience excruciating symptoms that include:

- Jealousy
- Anger/Rage
- Paranoia
- Hypervigilance
- Control issues
- Suspicion
- Self-worth issues
- Fear
- Hurt
- Loss of relationship

When you've been damaged at the deep trust level, it is incredibly hard to trust someone again. Your brain tries to protect you from experiencing that kind of pain so it creates the defense mechanisms that includes an early-warning system that red-flags anything and everything that could look like an attack on trust. While it makes perfect sense to those of us who have experienced it, others see us as wing nuts!

From other people's perspective, they are trustworthy, have never done anything to violate that trust, never would do anything to violate that trust, and don't understand why you don't see they are not the people from your past and why you don't stop looking to find fault in them. Further, if they do break a trust, from their perspective it often isn't a big deal and certainly not as big a deal as you make of it.

It's a HUGE disconnect we have in relationship with normal people that can cause significant discord in the relationship and even loss of the relationship.

Here's the problem we have: The people who violated our trust in our past were trustworthy people, too. Our mom or dad. An uncle or aunt. A court-appointed foster parent whose job it was to protect us. A person in authority who you are supposed to look up to. A sibling. You see, our trust was violated by a trusted person so no trusted person can really be trusted.

How, exactly, do you get over that one?

For the normal people out there, it's really not about you; it's about us protecting ourselves from being hurt that deeply again. Remember, we are damaged by our experiences so our emotional responses to things like betrayal don't work like yours. Our thought process has been compromised by abuse and neglect so we see life through a different prism than you do. While the normal person may not see any hint of betrayal in an action, those of us who have been betrayed see red flags everywhere!

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not defending this way of living as right. It's not. I am saying it's incredibly hard to change. I have made good, steady progress on this one in my own life, but I'll admit it still causes me problems in all my relationships.

So, what's the trick? First, you have to be okay with risk. Trusting someone is risky – anyone can turn on you so you have to be okay with that being part of the possible outcomes. Next, you have to be completely open, transparent, and honest with the people you deal with. It sounds counterintuitive, but I have found that when people understand *why* you act like you do, they are more willing to help than when they don't understand the “why” behind the “what” you are doing. Next, you need to ask people around you to be careful with certain triggers, which means you need to understand what triggers your trust issues. For example, if you can articulate that you feel uneasy when you don't have contact with someone for more than several hours, that person can send you a text or make a quick call each day to help out. Next, you need to build on success. This is the hardest. Again, our experience is trustworthy people violated our trust. But we can't let the actions of these people color how we see everyone, especially those closest to us. We have to build on the success of their trustworthiness in past situations to be able to trust them in the future. The hard part about this one is if there is a little slip up on their part you're back at square one. But you have to muscle through it and rebuild it every single time. Help them, help you.

You can't have relationship with people you don't trust. You'll never make a marriage work without trust. You won't be able to hold a job without some level of trust with your bosses and co-workers. You know that. The funny thing is we tend to be the most trustworthy people alive because of our hyper-trust issues! But we also can't hold others to that extreme standard because it's not possible for people to be perfect. We can hold people accountable, however, to clearly communicated standards that they have agreed to in order to help us.

Of the five pillars, trust may be your biggest hurdle. I know it's mine. But I also know that trust can be built, appropriate boundaries can replace our hypervigilant ones, and that you can make relationships work through honesty and open communication.

### **Loyalty**

The Army was doing a background investigation on me for a security clearance and one of my friends from high school was asked to describe me: "Loyal" was his answer. I'm extremely proud of that. Of all the traits I think are important, loyalty is number one. The reason is obvious – not many were loyal to me in my circumstances so I value anyone who stands by me through thick or thin, and I will stand by those I love no matter the cost. I will always have your six.

Clearly, trust and loyalty go hand-in-hand. Someone who violates your trust is not loyal and someone who is not loyal is not trustworthy. And because it hurts so deeply to be betrayed in these areas, we tend to withhold trust and loyalty until someone earns them through their actions over a significant period of time.

I used to work in politics and one of my clients had this great line: “Everyone has their price.” Isn’t that the truth. Judas sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. I’m sure someone has sold you out for a lot less. This is what makes loyalty so tough: everyone has their price and if it’s the right price you’ll be sold out. So, we have a decision to make when it comes to loyalty. Do we withhold loyalty from people because we know they will never really be able to be loyal to us because there always will be something more important to them than us? Or do we chance it, be loyal and work within the bounds of another person’s ability to be loyal? I choose the second path.

I am loyal, sometimes to a fault. I also don’t expect a lot out of other people – in fact, I almost expect them to fail in their loyalty to me. It’s not necessarily a negative thing, it just puts a boundary up where if they do fail I’m neither surprised nor hurt. It’s kind of a hope for the best but plan for the worst deal. By managing my friends this way, I’m also able to forgive them quickly when they blow it because I’m not terribly hurt by it and I really didn’t expect anything different. And I’ve had lots of practice at it!



How about you? Where are you at loyalty wise? Can you be loyal to someone who isn't particularly loyal to you? Do you withhold that loyalty out of fear of being betrayed? Do you expect too much loyalty out of people and then are always disappointed? You see, we all can play at friendship – fake our way through it. But that's not real relationship. Just because we grew up in dysfunctional environments doesn't mean we can't have meaningful relationships in our lives. It just means we have to work harder at it, sacrifice a little bit more than others, take uncomfortable risks, and have appropriate boundaries. I'd say be loyal to people because it's a great trait to have even if others struggle to be loyal back.

### **Love**

Here's a thought for you: Love is a decision not an emotion.

If you've suffered in your life, you most likely have experienced someone you love hurting you physically, sexually or emotionally. They say they love you but they beat you. They say they love you but molest you. They say they love you but they leave you. They say they love you but they neglect you. They say they love you but they don't care for you. They say they love you but they don't feed you. They say they love you but they don't provide a home for you. They say they love you but they don't care about what you think. They say they love you but (fill in the blank).

Love has been one of the most confusing concepts for me, because the way I grew up love was not expressed in a way that made sense. Love was expressed in ways that were conflicting and thus I never really learned how to express love or accept love that was normal. As you can imagine, this messes up relationships.

If your experience is like mine, you have friends – perhaps a lot of them – but you're not super close to any of them. There are some you're closer to than others, but you don't really have a "best friend" or someone you just absolutely trust with your life. You may feel as if you just don't connect with people that well. Part of it is most don't have the same kind of shared experiences that you have had so it's hard to relate to them. But the love thing gets in the way, too. You don't know how to love a friend. You can like them, but you don't have a clue what love is.

Growing up I never felt as if I fit in. Heck, even as an adult I never feel as if I fit in even when I'm leading the group! I always feel as if I am the proverbial square peg trying to fit into a round hole. I get self-conscious, feel inadequate, and am just uncomfortable around normal people. It's gotten a lot better since I delved deep into my Christian faith where I learned about unconditional love and how to give and receive it. But I'll be honest and say I'm still a major work in progress on this one.

But love is a decision, and that has helped me understand better how to love a friend unconditionally. I choose to care about them. I choose to support them. I choose to trust and be loyal to them. It's my decision so I have some control over it – and we all are control freaks, aren't we?

Think about it this way: If we can learn to trust and have loyalty with others, then we can decide to love them as well. That means that if they fail in their trust or loyalty, we have the proper boundaries in place so that we can continue to love them, show them forgiveness and not be hurt by their actions. See, as children we didn't have these abilities to define the playing field, establish the boundaries, write the rules like we do as adults. But now that we are out of the system, we truly control our destiny and we can choose to love others because we can also choose to have appropriate boundaries with those we love – boundaries that they cannot arbitrarily break to abuse us as others did when we were kids. We can love others unconditionally because we've decide to. We can love others even when they don't love us! We can decide who we love and why.

Now that we're in the driver's seat, don't rely on the thinking of a child when it comes to love. Decide to love and do so unconditionally – love others because you love them not based on their performance (ooh, that one probably gotcha!). Will you get your heart broken? Probably, but nobody will ever be able to love you if you don't love them, too. So, you have a choice: Go through life alone without love but safe, or take a chance, choose to love and open up a world you really don't even know exists right now. I'm doing it and while it's brutally hard, it also is extraordinarily worth it.

### **Friendship**

Pop Quiz: Do you have any real friends?

I suppose that's a loaded question. It really depends on what I mean by "real.". Do you have someone that no matter what would drop everything and be there for you? Do you have someone who would bail you out of jail? Do you have someone who would help you hide a body (just kidding, but you know what I mean!)?

When you grow up isolated as a foster kid it's hard to make friends. My situation was pretty tough that way. I was never in the same school for more than one year until my sophomore year in high school. I was in three different schools for 9<sup>th</sup> grade! We moved so often that even if I tried to make friends they never would stick. Then, being a foster kid with a dad in jail, I was bullied pretty good. When I was living with my dad, we were dirt poor so I didn't have a change of clothes so I wore the same thing to school every day making me a ripe target. I also didn't have great hygiene access so I'd get to school with messy hair, and I'd fall asleep in class because I was probably up late, especially if we were hunting for a place to sleep. You just don't make friends in that kind of environment. But worse, you don't learn *how* to make friends in that kind of environment.

I was blessed to be in the same high school for three years in a row, living with the same foster family during that time. It was the only time in my youth where there was actual stability: I knew I had food that day, I knew I had a roof over my head that day, and I knew that I could go to school that day. To most, that's normal; for me, that was a miracle. And I made friends. In fact, people I know from high school 36 years ago are still friends of mine to this day! But it was WORK!

For most, relationships come easy. For me, it was hard because of the trust and loyalty issues, not to mention the awkwardness I felt around normal people. I'll admit that in high school I faked most of it. I knew how one was supposed to act so that's what I did. I never really showed my true self. But over the years I've been more and more transparent and a funny thing happened: my friends still like me! When I was young, I never thought they'd like the real me, which is why I hid behind a pretty solid façade. You may have done the same thing. Perhaps to this day nobody really knows the real you! As an adult, however, we are allowed to show people who we really are warts and all. If they like us, great! If they don't? Oh well! Don't spend your entire life play-acting. God made the real you and if it's good enough for Him it's good enough for you and the rest of us!

Once you start getting the hang of friendships they get easier. When I was in the Army I met people who were as wild and crazy as I was. It's been 30 years and we still connect at a level that is beautiful. And yes, some of them would help me hide a body if I needed them to and vice versa!

We all need relationship – no man is an island even though many of us feel much more comfortable alone and isolated. God made us for relationship so we need to once again get out of our comfort zones and decide to have friends – true friends based on honesty, not role-playing. I think you'll be surprised, but people actually will like you for who you are!

### Respect

Ooh, this is a hard one. If you think about your own experiences, you've probably been disrespected so much over your life that you have no mercy for disrespectful people. In fact, you could be like me and have an extremely high bar when it comes to respecting others, looking for incredible amounts of integrity, loyalty, ability, competence, honesty, and more. The fact is, we look for the things in people we didn't see in those who were abusing us. We respect those people because we have such disdain for our abusers!

How then can we have relationship with people we don't respect? How do you build a relationship with someone who has to earn your respect through their performance? You can't. And that's the problem with the way we look at respect.

My wife taught me a hard lesson on this. She's the EXACT opposite of me in pretty much everything. She comes from an exceedingly normal family which taught her you have basic respect for everyone. That concept never even crossed my mind before I met her. Given my experience with people – mostly bad – I held fast to the idea that respect was earned not given. Her way of doing things would end in disappointment and hurt because most people I had known were disrespectful, inconsiderate, self-centered, greedy, self-important, and oppressive. Thus, my default was: people were not worthy of respect.

I've since changed my tune. I have a basic respect for everyone. Yes, there are jerks out there that are hard to respect. But I do everything I can to show grace to everyone. Why? Well, at my worst moments with my PTSD I'm pretty much a jerk, too. Sometimes we forget that our damage causes us to be disrespectful yet others show us grace – in fact, we sometimes expect others to show us grace, because we are damaged yet we don't do the same to them! It has to work both ways.

I have no idea what kind of person any given stranger is. I don't know their past, their issues, their mental/emotional health, their current circumstances. I don't know anything so I treat them the way I'd like to be treated – show some grace and common decency even when they aren't acting their best. Everyone deserves general respect until they do something that loses it for them. Believe me, those that are disrespectful will lose their grace quickly enough through their actions! But by giving this modicum of respect in general, those who deserve it will not be automatically eliminated from your circle of relationships just because you don't respect people in general!

Trust, loyalty, love, friendship and respect. Brutal concepts for those of us who spent our youth in the system. Concepts that others took advantage of to hurt us, abuse us, and control us. Yet, without them, we lose our humanity. We become cold, calculating, heartless, emotionless terminators. (I know, that sounds appealing but it's not supposed to!)

God made us for relationship which is why we crave it so badly. Yet, we screw it up so badly because while we want to be loved we do everything in our power to keep others from loving us! In fact, we often self-sabotage ourselves so people won't even like us!

Why is trust, loyalty, love, friendship and respect so important in our daily lives? Well, because you have to interact with people no matter who you are. You have to be in a work environment with leaders, bosses, supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, colleagues, business partners, vendors, customers and more. All these engagements test our ability at relationship. You will have neighbors and friends with whom you will engage. If you're like me, you'll have biological and foster family members with whom you're close, as well as in-laws! Even just going to the store involves engaging with people! We need the skills of our five pillars to deal with the kinds of people we meet in every environment. We can't let our behavioral and relational dysfunction control our lives. We must learn to appropriately manage our five pillars of relationship in such a way that we can function normally in polite society.

Coupled with trigger control and management, the five pillars of relationship can fundamentally change how you view and deal with people. We can't just go around being triggered by relationships every day. That's no way to live. If you work on these five pillars you'll find that you can live very differently, much more comfortably around people, which in turn will help you heal in the area of relationships.



### Chapter 6 - Intimate Relationships

The five pillars of relationship are the foundation of relationship building. However, I want to take a deeper dive into intimate relationships. My experience is our abuse/neglect backgrounds adversely affect our ability to engage in intimate relationships such as dating and marriage. By now, I think you can clearly understand why, but allow me to walk through this section in greater detail and just share what I have learned and am still learning about relational intimacy post foster care.

As I've said, former foster kids crave love. It's human nature to want to be liked, loved, known and cared for. However, because of our abuse/neglect, people loving us actually hurts us because it triggers enormous emotional pain. It is such a contradiction – we want so badly to be loved but it hurts so badly to be loved.

My experience is that to protect ourselves from pain we try to control intimate relationships by putting conditions, rules, and restrictions on the other person in an effort to keep them from hurting us. Each time we get hurt – and we do get hurt – we ratchet the control mechanisms down harder, believing that if we can just control the other person's actions we will be safe and thus be able to love that person without fear. That, my friends, is not a relationship, it is a prison for both you and your significant other.

Let me address this right up front: we do love the other person, but we do so imperfectly and dysfunctionally. I've seen these various memes on Facebook talking about if a person does such and such they really don't love you. These memes clearly are written by people with absolutely no experience with childhood abuse/neglect and no clue about the difficulties we face in relationship. Of course, we love the other person but we are so damaged by our experience we have no idea how to properly express that love. In fact, loving someone is so confusing to us that we resort to our default – survival mode! And when in survival mode, we engage all our defense mechanisms which results in some very bad behavior on our part.

So, what are our defense mechanisms? For each of us they are different but let me list some from my own life and the lives of people with whom I have counseled.

- Anger when people get too close to drive them away
- Isolation when hurt
- Tearing the other person down to lift yourself up
- Manipulating the other person to make them feel as if their complaint is wrong or crazy
- Escalating an argument to the point the other person quits – the nuclear option
- Berating the other person to keep them from attacking you – the best defense is a good offense!

- Shutting down emotionally – closing the other person out
- Controlling the other person – how they dress, who they see, where they go
- Turning the tables on the other person pointing out their flaws instead of dealing with your own
- Actions to make the other person feel guilty
- Take actions that you know will hurt the other person as much as you've been hurt – tit for tat
- Punish the other person in some way so they don't do what they did again
- Threaten self-harm to manipulate the person into acting a certain way

Now, think for a moment; how would you react if someone were treating you this way? At first, you may be sympathetic or maybe even empathic. However, after weeks, months and maybe even years of this you'd call it quits. You just wouldn't be able to take the emotional abuse and manipulation no matter how much you loved the other person. I've seen it happen and actually have had it happen to me.

This is why it is *so* important you get control of your triggers and learn how to not just manage but heal your dysfunction. If you ever hope to have an intimate relationship, you have to be able to act appropriately and not just shut down and go into survival mode.

You may be thinking, “Okay, I get that, but what kind of stuff does intimate relationships trigger that regular relationships don’t?” Great question! Some of it is the same just more intense. But there are things that intimate relationships trigger that are different than any other relationship you may have. Let me walk through some of it.

### **Abandonment**

Perhaps I’ve spent so much time on abandonment because it is a significant issue I deal with and maybe I’m projecting that on you. But if you’ve been separated from your family – and foster kids have had an average of three placements, according to the research – chances are feelings of abandonment are real in your life as well.

With normal relationships, you don’t really have this issue. People come and go and you deal with it pretty well. But with intimate relationships it’s different. Think about it this way, you have abandonment issues because people with whom you were intimate – family members – were either taken from you or left. Now, you’re in an intimate relationship again and those old feelings creep in because the intimacy of the relationship triggers them. The more you care about a person the more you get concerned they will leave! If a co-worker or acquaintance de-friends you on Facebook you really don’t care. But if the person you’re dating gets mad at you, you’ll freak out because you’ll be convinced they’re leaving you.

The hard part about abandonment syndrome is there is nothing the other person can do to convince you they're not leaving you. No matter how much time they've spent with you, how loyal they've been, your trigger convinces you that they're eventually going to leave because people in your past were loyal and even long-term people in your life before they left, too.

Abandonment triggers suck because you never really feel at ease with the other person. You'll either try to control their activities to stay safe or disconnect from them emotionally in preparation for being hurt. I cannot stress the importance to work on this issue when you get serious about someone because it can be a relationship killer.

### **Feeling Alone**

It is so hard to connect with someone at an intimate level when you've experienced what we experienced. Often, we feel completely alone and misunderstood even when the relationship is good.

The problem is that no matter how much we tell someone about our past, how we feel, and what makes us tick, they'll never really completely get it. They've just never experienced it so their brain works very differently than ours. The prism through which they see the world also is completely different than ours. This leaves us feeling alone and isolated within the relationship.

When that happens, you can have a lot of different reactions, including:

- Anger that the person you love isn't understanding or applying what you've shared
- Hurt that the other person seems unable or unwilling to take your background into consideration as they make decisions and interact with you
- Frustrated and discouraged that you can't seem to explain yourself in a way that makes sense to the other person
- Depressed because you realize that you truly are alone and that nobody really ever will understand you
- Hopeless that it's even worth the effort

Those feelings often trigger reactions that are inappropriate ranging from attacking the other person to self-medicating to isolating yourself to just simply giving up. I know I sound like a broken record, but trigger management is key to this, as well as having a clear view of things and not one clouded by emotions as we previously discussed.

### **Divided Attention**

This one usually falls under the category of jealousy but I want to develop it beyond that simplistic idea. I'll use myself as an example for this.

Have you ever seen that book *The Five Love Languages*? Basically, it asserts there are five different love languages we all have with one being the dominant. The five languages are:

- Words of Affirmation
- Quality Time
- Receiving Gifts
- Acts of Service
- Physical Touch<sup>[19]</sup>

My dominant love language is quality time. Not only do I want to spend time with the person I love, but I want them to be focused on me during that time! In my life, I spent a lot of time alone, feeling quite unloved, unappreciated, uncared for, and isolated. I wouldn't say I'm clingy, but I would say that I perhaps have an unhealthy need for connection to my wife. I try to connect with her by email/text/messaging/phone a few times a day. When she's home, I like her to spend time with me. When she is busy doing stuff, such as work project in her home office, it bothers me that she's not with me. When she away from me with other people – work colleagues, family, friends – I get a little hinky because her attention is not on me! Aside from God, I want to be her main priority and I can get triggered when I don't feel as if I am.

When it comes to other men, I get very territorial. This is where most women in my life have not understood me very well. Maybe I can't explain it right, but I'll give it a try.

I absolutely trust my wife's fidelity in our marriage. I've absolutely trusted the girls I dated in my youth as well. What I didn't trust was other men trying to vie for their attention inappropriately. Certainly, other men sniffing around my significant other triggers abandonment issues, but it also triggers divided attention issues, making me feel as if I am not the priority when my significant other pays attention to male friends, co-workers, et al. Yes, I know it's CRAZY, but isn't that the point? We're damaged and trying desperately to be as normal as we can but we'll never truly be fully normal. I'm just being honest and sharing with you something you, too, may go through. And it's not just a man thing – plenty of women I know have this issue as well when other women sniff around their man or their man pays attention to another woman even if it is just a friend.



It's not just jealousy, it's the trigger of a much deeper and more painful emotional abuse that is unresolved in our lives. My wife was telling me the other day how important touch is for a baby and young kids in their development stages. It communicates love, caring, provision, safety and more. If you're like me, you didn't get a lot of that. In fact, I was sharing with Lisa that I don't remember ever really being touched like that. My earliest memories of touch are my dad spanking me for touching my mom's face as I explained earlier, and living with my German grandparents who were, well, German which isn't the most touchy-feely group of people on the planet. There really wasn't any touch in any of the homes I was in, and my dad really wasn't that kind of guy either. Apparently, I missed out on this important piece, which may be why I am so defensive about my wife's attention being on me and only me. I don't want to share her attention really with anyone. You can imagine how hard that is because she has to share her attention with co-workers, friends, family, and more.

I've had to learn how to let go a bit. I'm still working on it, but I think I've gotten better at it. I still get triggered on this one, I won't lie. But I'm working on management techniques and healing so that I don't feel so threatened by her divided attention.

### Expectations

This is a hard one in any intimate relationship, but especially hard for former foster kids. The closer someone is to us the more and higher expectations we place on them in the relationship. Because of our issues, we tend to place inappropriate expectations on our significant other – expectations that they either can't meet or with which they don't agree.

I used to live by the motto, "Expectation leads to disappointment." My experience in life was nobody ever met any expectation I had of them. Perhaps that's your experience as well. People you expected to protect you didn't. People you expected to tell the truth didn't. People you expected to love you didn't. People you expected to provide for you didn't. People you expected to stand by you didn't. The list goes on and on. The hard part is our expectations were not unrealistic. These people in our lives should have protected us, been truthful with us, loved us, provided for us, stood by us, and more! But when they didn't meet these reasonable expectations we realized it was no accident; they intentionally didn't do what we expected them to do! This affects how we look at people and what we expect from them.

This may sound counter-intuitive or oxy-moronic, but in response we set our expectation of people even higher! What would make sense is that we have no expectations of people whatsoever because we know they won't come through. But here's the problem with that thinking: if we don't set expectations on people it's chaos – they can do whatever they want! When we set expectations on people, it's a subtle way of controlling their actions because we set a standard we expect them to meet. See how that works?

When we get into intimate relationships, we set the bar REALLY high because there is so much at risk for us emotionally. But often we set the bar too high. The reality is not only can your significant other not meet that expectation but nobody could really meet that expectation. There are two reasons we do this: First, we do it to protect ourselves. By setting an extreme expectation we know that if it's met we're safe. The problem is it's never met so we're never safe. Second, we set an extreme expectation as a self-fulfilling prophecy – we know people fail us so we set an extreme expectation to prove that people fail us. It's a weird psychology but it's true.

One of the hardest things I've had to do is eliminate expectations from my marriage. Not things like fidelity or honesty or that kind of stuff. But the daily grind stuff. I love expectations and accountability! I think they are really, really important. But it doesn't work well for my wife and thus doesn't work well for our relationship. She was always feeling inadequate, and I was feeling let down. The solution was obvious – get rid of the expectations. I'll tell you that it's a lot harder than it sounds. However, I'll also tell you that it is incredibly freeing when you can do it.

Again, I'm a work in progress with this piece. But I have figured out a few things along the way. First, I'm okay. What I mean by that is nothing bad happens if my wife doesn't do something I formerly expected her to do. I'm okay. Second, I'm not disappointed all the time. Remember my motto? Well, without expectations there is no disappointment. That's very cool. Third, my wife is significantly happier and you know the old saying, "Happy wife, happy life!"

Let me share how you eliminate expectations from your life in case you're interested in trying this yourself. First, you have to examine how much value you're giving your various expectations. Chances are really good that you're giving them way too much value in your life. Thus, you need to devalue them. For example, if you expect your wife to come home after work and cook dinner for you and you think that is really important, perhaps you need to rethink that idea and give it less value. In turn, that will result in you perhaps sharing those duties with her during the week so it doesn't all fall on her.

After you devalue your various expectations, you have to share your new approach with your significant other. He/she needs to know what you're doing and understand how you're going to go about implementing the new structure so they can be a partner with you in it.

Third, you need to show grace when you first start out and it's hard; you need to keep your commitment to de-value the expectation and not go back to old habits. In other words, you need to keep your mouth shut if you get triggered as you're working through this process. It's not fair to your significant other to hold them accountable to something you've said you're no longer holding them accountable to!

Lastly, you need to change your mindset. This is the most important part. Once you make the decision that some expectation is no longer on the list, you need to purge it from your mind and allow this new structure to be your new normal. In my life, one of the hardest expectations to give up has been how much time my wife spends with me when we're home. She is pretty distracted at times by work, which can be overflowing with requirements. It means she has to work at home a lot.

It used to really bother me – when you're home the expectation is I'm the priority not work! But I've been trying to de-value that – which is hard because it's my love language! But what I'm doing is changing my mindset so that I don't care about the time she needs to complete work tasks when she's home. I think I'm doing better with it. She just went through a month where she was out of town twice, and worked I think three weekends at home instead of spending time with me. My head didn't explode, so we're good to go! I changed my mindset about things and it worked out.

Setting unattainable expectations can really damage your relationship. Setting expectations with which your significant other disagrees can be a relationship killer. You have to be awfully careful with expectations, so my advice is talk through your expectation with your significant other. Don't just tell them what the expectations are, explain why you have them, why they are important, where they come from, and how you need their help. If your significant other is not able to meet that expectation, you have a choice to make – keep banging your head against a wall or adjust fire and regroup how you will handle that issue.

Understand that having these expectations are just another way we're trying to protect ourselves, so they fall under the category of defense mechanisms. You have to determine if the reason you have the expectation is a healthy one or not, and if not, you need to own that and do something about it instead of having your significant other carry your burden on that.

### **Intimacy**

Yeah, I'm talking about sex and yeah, it can trigger you.

Obviously, anyone who was sexually abused could have trouble with sexual intimacy that could include flashbacks, nightmares, uncomfortableness/uneasiness with touch, self-loathing, emotional numbing, and more. This triggering can cause tension and discord in an intimate relationship. And don't just think it is women having the trigger; men also have been sexually abused and struggle just as much.

But it's not just the sexually abused who struggle with sexual intimacy; I honestly believe that all abused children will struggle with it. Here's why: again, the intimates in our lives were the ones who abused us. The people we trusted most hurt us physically, emotionally, mentally, and even spiritually. When you engage in sexual intimacy as an adult, you are at your absolute most vulnerable emotionally. If anything goes wrong in that moment the consequences are extreme and long-lasting.

It is vital that you share with your partner your vulnerability and the level of care they must take with you in this most intimate setting. You have to work out how you're going to communicate so that there are no misunderstandings. For example, if you are interested in sexual intimacy but your spouse is not it can feel like he/she is rejecting you, which triggers a flood of emotion. This is especially true if your love language is physical touch; you will feel as if your partner is rejecting your love or doesn't love you back! You have to figure out how to communicate in such a way that you are not triggered by the normal interactions in relationship.

Touch can be especially difficult. For some of us, the only physical touch we had in our lives was violence. Learning to accept someone touching us in a loving and intimate way may feel uncomfortable and awkward. There may be times you're fine with it but others where your skin just crawls when someone is touching you. I think you just have to be honest with your partner and explain to them that first, it has nothing to do with them and that it's you and your history. Second, that you just need a little space but that you love them and not to take it personally. Sexual intimacy has a lot to do with trust so you have to get to a place where you trust your partner and don't trigger when they touch you. This may take time and patience, but together you can get through it.

Emotionally, as we've discussed, we are extremely vulnerable during sexual intimacy. If you are like me, you're also extremely vulnerable afterwards unless you just shut down when the sexual encounter ends. I cannot stress how important it is to talk about these things with your partner so they can help protect you during these engagements. My wife will be shocked to read that last sentence because I absolutely suck at talking about it. I don't like talking about it, I am embarrassed to talk about it. I will avoid talking about it at all costs. But I also know that by doing so I create my own problems. We recently had a conversation that spanned the length of our relationship and incidents that hurt me that I never really discussed. Some were decades old. But by finally getting them on the table it's helped our relationship quite a bit. It can be extremely hard to discuss this stuff, but I'm going to encourage you to do it for the betterment of your relationship and your own personal sanity.



As you can see, there are several trigger issues that are particular to intimate relationships. I am sure there are more than the ones I've discussed, and again, will be specific to your own unique relationship. Here's something else you have to keep in mind: You may not be the only one in the relationship with issues! It gets really exciting when you both have trigger issues and you have to work out how to do things while protecting each other!

Now that we've discussed some of the difficulties we face with intimate relationships, I want to look at the type of person we should be seeking with whom to be in relationship.

I don't have the scientific evidence to back this up but it's been my observation that we choose one of several type of people when we are looking for an intimate relationship:

### *The Norm*

This is the person we see as normal and healthy. They are all the things we are not – they come from a solid family, are able to navigate life, and are really stable. We are drawn to these people like a moth to a flame because they have what we don't!

### *The Savior*

This person is the one who is extremely empathetic and you feel as if they're the only one who really gets you. They are extremely grace filled and can not only put up with but can manage all your highs and lows.

### *The Parent Figure*

This person is probably older and represents the parent you didn't really have. They are more authoritarian and directive with you, which you actually want. You receive affirmation by performing as the person wants you to which you equate with love.

### *Just Like Me*

Sometimes we gravitate to people just like us! Talk about mixing gas and matches! But we're comfortable with them because they've been through what we've been through and understand our struggles and we understand theirs. The problem is you will end up triggering one another and your relationship may be really rocky and volatile.

### *Abuser*

Unfortunately, we seek out abusers because the only type of relationship we know is one where we are maltreated. We don't feel worthy of being loved appropriately so we find people who will "love" us the only way we've ever experienced – through abuse.

There are probably lots more categories but you get the idea. Obviously, we all should be choosing someone who loves us for who we are, is both sympathetic and empathetic, yet they hold us accountable and help us grow and heal. But where do you find that kind of person and how do you know that's who they are?

There is a Bible verse that is a great litmus test for people, including yourself! 1 Corinthians 13 is sometimes called "The Love Chapter" because the writer talks about what love is. If you've ever been to a wedding you've probably heard it. The trick with the verse, however, is to replace the word "Love" with the name of the person you are dating and then do it with yourself as well. Let me show you. Here is 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 on love:

4 **Love** is patient, **love** is kind. **It** does not envy, **it** does not boast, **it** is not proud. 5 **It** does not dishonor others, **it** is not self-seeking, **it** is not easily angered, **it** keeps no record of wrongs. 6 **Love** does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 **It** always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 **Love** never fails.

As you can see, I've bold-faced all the times the word "love" is used, including as "it." Now, let's say I wanted to do this exercise with my wife, Lisa. Here's how this would read:

4 **Lisa** is patient, **Lisa** is kind. **Lisa** does not envy, **Lisa** does not boast, **Lisa** is not proud. 5 **Lisa** does not dishonor others, **Lisa** is not self-seeking, **Lisa** is not easily angered, **Lisa** keeps no record of wrongs. 6 **Lisa** does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 **Lisa** always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 **Lisa** never fails.

Once I do this I have to ask myself, "Is this true about Lisa? Does she fit this description?" You will find that nobody does everything listed here perfectly, but you can also see that if you find someone who does pretty well in these categories, you have a winner like I do with Lisa. Now, if I did this same thing and put my name in it, how do you think I'd do? How about you? How would you do if you put your name in it? This is the kind of person we want to be in our intimate relationships, people who are:

- Patient
- Kind
- Not Envious
- Not Boastful
- Not Proud
- Not Dishonoring
- Not Self-Seeking
- Not Easily Angered
- Doesn't Keep a Record of Wrongs
- Does Not Delight in Evil
- Rejoices in the Truth
- Always Protects
- Always Trusts
- Always Hopes
- Always Perseveres
- Never Fails

Does this kind of person even exist? Probably not in our experience, but yes, they actually do! Where do you find them? Probably not at the bar.

If I were going to advise you, which I am, here's where I'd tell you to look:

- Church – There are no perfect people there, but there are people there who are trying to be better
- Work – People with a good work ethic usually have many of these qualities
- Online dating – Believe it or not, you can actually determine if people value these traits in their profiles and through initial dates. *eHarmony, Christian Mingle*, even *Farmers Only* may be your thing!
- Through trusted friends – Sometimes your friends have a pretty good outsider's perspective of you and can set you up with someone they see would fit with you

That being said, no matter where you meet someone you have to determine what kind of person they are and if they have the personality traits that would make them a good fit for you and your background. Not everyone can handle people like us and it's not their fault. We are **very difficult** people to be around and live with. However, there are people out there who actually thrive at dealing with people like us, who want to help us and grow with us. You just have to be thoughtful about who you choose. Because we want to be loved so badly, sometimes we just glom onto the first person that comes along and shows us some attention. It's how many young foster care age outs end up being sex trafficked! Someone shows them love and attention for the first time in their lives and they fall hook, line and sinker. It's also why the research showed so many young foster girls being pregnant by age 21. You have to be super discerning or you could end up in a bad relationship or worse!

### **The Relationship**

Once you're actually in the relationship you quickly learn that there is a lot of negotiation that takes place. Nothing in an intimate relationship is actually 50/50. It's more like some things are 100/0, while others are 75/25 or 60/40. There is a ton of give and take, compromise, and renegotiating the goes on constantly. I want to walk you through a process that I think will help you set your priorities the proper way so you can manage your relationship in a stable way.

There are things I call "Foundational Beliefs." These beliefs are things that are not negotiable. For me, they include my faith, fidelity, loyalty, and some other things I just won't compromise. Each person in the relationship has these beliefs and you have to first determine what they are and second if you can live with each other's foundational beliefs. Understand, a foundational belief will never change, cannot be compromised, and if crossed is a deal breaker for the relationship.

Once that list is complete, **EVERYTHING ELSE IS NEGOTIABLE.**

Yup, that's what I said, *everything else is negotiable.*

Here is where I see people make a mistake with this, including the younger me! You put things in the foundational belief list that don't belong there and put things in the negotiable list that should be foundational beliefs! When you do this, disaster will ensue!

You have to be brutally honest with yourself as you make your foundational belief list. You ask yourself this question, “Would I leave this person over this?” If the answer is, no, but I’d be mad as crap if it happened, then it’s negotiable not foundational. But if the answer is, “Yes, I just couldn’t make it work if this happened,” then it’s foundational.

Once you have your lists of foundational beliefs, the game is on! You then start working through the issues in your relationship and figuring out how you will negotiate them out! Here’s a list of some of the things you may want to discuss.



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- Household duties: cooking, cleaning, garbage, dishes, laundry, vacuuming, bathroom et al
- Finances: paying bills, keeping checkbooks, managing loans and investments
- Taking care of the children
- Taking care of the animals
- Transportation – who drives what and whom, when
- Communication – how to approach one another, how to communicate effectively
- Work schedules – including working from home
- Faith issues
- In-law issues – holidays, visits, etc.
- Food issues
- Hobbies and self-care
- Discretionary spending
- Major purchases (cars, house, boat, remodel/painting)
- Simple things (who gets the mail, brand name or generic, kinds of gifts each likes, etc.)

There are a million moving parts in intimate relationships and marriage and the list above is anything but exhaustive. Every day there seems to be some new thing that happens that you've not dealt with before. Perhaps that's why they say that marriage is the spice of life! The idea here is pretty simple though: communicate about everything and negotiate who does what and how so that there is no confusion about anything in your daily grind. This reduces the "unknowns" and increases control, which reduces anxiety and the possibility of being triggered.

I'm going to stop here and move into Communication in the next chapter. As you can see, intimate relationships take a ton of work. Finding Mr. or Mrs. Right is not going to fix your problem. In fact, it's going to complicate your life in many ways. However, if you are a person who wants to get better, stronger, and more well-adjusted, the caldron of an intimate relationship is the place it will happen because you will have to address all the issues we've discussed and more!

### Chapter 7 - Communication

Because we're talking about communicating, I'd like to really dive into it now based on my own experience. I've found that it's not so much what is being said but how it's being said that triggers me. Lisa and I have worked hard for many years, especially early in our relationship, on how to approach subjects in a way that works for both of us.

What if your significant other said to you, "We need to talk." What would be your natural reaction? Just writing that phrase makes me defensive and anxious. Your partner may not mean anything sinister by saying this; they may just mean they want to talk. But how they phrased the line can really set you off! This is what I mean by approach. It can be so important that you and your spouse approach each other the right way because a wrong approach can raise anxiety, suspicion, anger and other defense mechanisms.

All of us have sensitive subjects we are not thrilled to talk about. But for we former foster kids, our list can be extensive because of our backgrounds. In my own life, I've healed in many areas so am able to talk about nearly anything. But for decades there were subjects that were taboo or had to be handled with the greatest of care or I'd trigger. Let me see if I can list some of the topics that may be sensitive to us in general.

- Our childhood
- Our parents
- Our abuse/neglect
- Foster homes
- Child protective services
- Police
- Judicial courts
- Jail/prison
- Being made fun of
- Being the butt of the joke
- Being bullied
- Being poor
- Being abandoned
- Not being fed
- Being homeless
- Sex
- Friends or lack thereof
- Our mental health
- Our emotional pain
- Our nightmares and flashbacks
- Former betrayals

- Money
- Our anger
- Our jealousy
- Our defense mechanisms
- Our health
- Criticism of any kind

You may or may not resonate with these and there are probably dozens more based on your own experiences. But think about this: How can you have an intimate relationship with someone if you can't talk about any of the stuff on that list? Don't you think that would make it really tough on someone trying to get to know you? And what if that person inadvertently stepped on those landmines while trying to get to know you and triggered you in the various areas every time they tried to have a conversation with you? Welcome to my life in my late teens and 20s!

I feel really badly for some people who were in my life because I did not have the experience, maturity, or ability to do the things I am suggesting you do here. Instead, it felt as if I were constantly triggered in every conversation I had with people in my life – every conversation ended up in an argument somehow with me going bottle rocket! Again, it wasn't so much the topics as how they were approached and discussed. I just didn't know it at the time!

Normal people really don't have this problem at the level we do. They may get a twinge of emotion over some topic, but they don't trigger, they don't raise all their defenses and they don't see their partner as the enemy or one of "them" when it happens the way we do. So, when we do get triggered our partners usually have no idea what the heck is going on and why we can't just have a normal conversation!

Let's talk about approaches so that we can learn how to talk about sensitive subjects with our partners in a way that is both productive and safe.

The first step is talking with your partner about this during a calm moment. You don't want to try to negotiate approaches in the heat of battle – nothing comes out of those conversations but hurt feelings. Instead, choose a time when things are good and ask your partner if you can talk with them about helping you do a better job communicating. Chances are *really* good they will be eager to do so!

Next, explain to them the best you can the things that trigger you and why. Ask them not to turn that part of the conversation into a discussion – you'll go down rabbit trails and honestly get triggered. In this part of the conversation you need to just share information without commentary. Let your partner know that they can ask questions about it when you finish explaining it but you need to get through it so you don't lose focus as you talk.

Then ask if your partner is willing to work with you on approaching you in a way that helps you ease into discussions and manage your triggers. This is a partnership and they have to be willing to help or it won't work.

If they agree, which most people certainly would who truly care about you, then you need to pick some topics with which you struggle and work out how you will approach the topics and discuss them. You also need to determine a way to exit the conversation that you both agree on should you become agitated but BEFORE you trigger. Let's go through some examples of possible approaches and methods.

### **Money**

So many couples fight about money. There is no doubt money can be a cause of stress in any relationship, especially one where one of the partners was poor. I find that we former foster kids have a tendency to spend the money we get and buy ourselves stuff. We do so for a few reasons. First, we can! That is such a liberating feeling coming from where we come from. There is no greater joy I get than walking into a store and knowing I can buy anything in there! That's a far cry from when I would walk around a mall and know I couldn't buy anything at all even a gumball. Second, because of the high we get from knowing we can buy stuff, spending money is a weird kind of therapy. I suspect it releases some kind of feel-good chemical in our brain (dopamine) so when we feel down, we do shopping therapy! As my wife tells people, "Tom doesn't shop, he buys!"

Third, if you're like me you grew up in an environment of fiscal irresponsibility. My dad ran up credit cards, didn't pay bills, spent every dime he had on booze and women. You learn through that behavior to be irresponsible with money as well. You learn that you satisfy your desires and worry about paying for them later. Instant gratification and impulse purchases becomes more important than smart money management. Another reason may be after years of poverty you believe you *deserve* good things in your life. Kind of a reward for surviving it all. Whatever the reason, we tend to spend. If you have a wife like mine who comes from a finance family, is a minimalist, and wants to save every single dime we make, there can be conflict!

Luckily, Lisa and I never really fought about money. But we did have to discuss it a lot as she tried to manage the accounts after one of my shopping sprees! I don't really like to talk about money. It makes me nervous because it triggers a lot of stuff. But in marriage you have to talk about money! I asked Lisa to approach me in a certain way and NOT to approach me in others when it came to money. Here is how I like to talk about it.

Don't say, "We need to talk about the checking account."

Do say, "Hey, we're down to about \$200 in the checking account until payday so you may want to slow down the spending."

Don't say, "You're spending too much money."



Do say, “Are you feeling okay? I noticed you’re shopping a lot. Are you feeling down?”

Don’t say, “I’m going to cut you off if you keep spending like this!”

Do say, “Hey, we have to be more careful or we’re not going to be able to pay the rent.”

Do you see how the “don’t say” approaches could set me off while the “do say” approaches are softer, are inclusive using “we” instead of “you” and actually talk about the problem not the symptom of spending money? Lisa is great now about this. She will routinely tell me how much is in the checking account until payday, which is my clue to pull back which I do. It’s not like we don’t have money – there is plenty in savings and other places for me to continue to spend even if the checking account is low. However, in our communication her telling me the account is low is a way to ask me to stop spending so much. I very much appreciate her helping me with this approach.

### **Defense Mechanisms**

Again, everyone is different but my main defense mechanism is anger. I learned as a child that anger can be used to turn people off, get them away from you, and control a situation or environment.

When I trigger, I get angry. But that's inappropriate behavior and your partner will have to talk with you about it. How in the world does your partner approach you about your defense mechanisms and anger without tripping your defense mechanisms and anger? See the problem? Let's look at the Dos and Don'ts.

Don't say, "We have to talk about your anger!"

Do say, "How can I help you when you're angry so that we can communicate better?"

Don't say, "You have got to stop getting angry!"

Do say, "I'd like to find a way for us to communicate without the anger."

Don't say, "You have no reason to be angry!"

Do say, "Can you help me understand why you get angry?"

Don't say, "I can't deal with you when you're angry."

Do say, "I think it's better we take a break should you get upset during the conversation."

This kind of thinking can apply to really any defense mechanism. Basically, I'm advocating, not attacking the defense mechanism – realize that it's just a symptom of a much deeper and more troubling problem. The idea here is to try to get to the cause of the problem by asking why there is anger and how to help the person in crisis who is triggered and activating their defense mechanism.

That said, anger is one of those things we need to not just control but do our best to eliminate from our arsenal. This means working with your partner on healing the causes of it. It also means you getting some self-control and discipline and not allowing yourself to blow up by replacing your reaction with an intentional action as we discussed earlier in the triggers chapter. When you are angry, you are abusive. Raising your voice, using aggressive or violent language, and **ANY** physical action (punching a wall, throwing a toaster, kicking a chair) is abuse! Don't be an abuser; if you're struggling with anger triggers get help **NOW!**

### Help Around the House

Sometimes couples fight about the division of labor around the house and that can include child care issues as well. Some men have grown up thinking the woman is responsible for household duties and child rearing. He, on the other hand, is responsible for earning a living and then relaxing and being served when he returns to his “castle.” Most of us would think that is an outdated concept, but you would be surprised how many men grew up thinking that was how a normal marriage worked.

You can imagine a wife’s exasperation with someone who won’t help with the cooking, cleaning, washing, kids, and the rest. Chances are good she works, too, and is just as tired when she returns to her castle – she’s the queen, you know! This is how a conversation on this topic should and should not be approached from the man’s point of view.

Don’t say, “Why are you so lazy? Can’t you just lift one finger to help out around the house?”

Do say, “I’m exhausted and I really need your help if you’re willing to give me a hand.”

Don’t say, “They’re your children, too. You need to be more involved!”

Do say, “The kids really need daddy time because you have so much to teach them.”

Don't say, "Stop throwing your dirty clothes on the floor! Were you born in a barn?"

Do say, "I'm going to put a net over the laundry hamper and see if you can make those shots!"

I know what you're thinking: "Really?" Yes, really. Consider this: as a foster kid we grow up imagining what normal life will be like. We really don't know and have no real models of it in our world. So, we create a normal life in our fantasy world. And we fantasize a lot about what our life will be like in that world when we age out. If we are approached in ways that question or deflate our vision it also crushes our spirit. I remember just how demoralized I was when I realized that the fantasy world of normal I had created wasn't real at all. It was a real setback in my life.

That said, we need to be working on healing and no longer needing our partner to approach us in soft and non-triggering ways. But as you work on these things, if you can agree on the approach it will significantly improve your communication which obviously will improve your relationship.

I would encourage you to make a list of all the different things you struggle talking about, including the way you react when you have to talk about them. Then figure out the best approach – the way you would want your partner to approach you to discuss these sensitive topics. Then sit down with your partner and negotiate an agreement on the best approaches. And then you put it into play. If it doesn't quite work out the first couple times, make adjustments and keep working at it. You'll find that as you talk more and more the topics become less and less sensitive. That's a good thing!

### **Conclusion**

Intimacy is really hard sometimes. We can be so sensitive and our emotions are such raw nerves that normal intimate relationship can be extraordinarily painful. But we have to learn to heal in this area or we'll have a very lonely existence. But there is hope – many former foster kids have learned how to love and be loved; it just takes some work, discipline, and a willingness to stick with it when it gets hard.

### **Chapter 8 - Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**

Thus far, I've done a pretty good job of sharing some of my experiences without really telling you anything about me. I actually did that on purpose! I don't want this book to be about me; it's about you and how to survive life after foster care. However, I'm going to talk about healing versus management of our issues in Chapter 9 and to do so I really need to share my story with you to set the stage, gain some credibility (it truly does take one to know one), and prove to you that what I'll tell you in Chapter 9 is real and can work for you as well. In other words, I need to show you how ugly and broken my life was versus how incredible it is now so that you will know I'm not just blowing smoke when share in the next chapter how to actually heal our wounds and not just manage them day-to-day. I bet you want to skip this part and jump right into Chapter 9 now! Please don't. I really think you need to see my personal transformation from a dumpster fire to a functional and fairly well-adjusted and productive person to really understand what I'm going to tell you next.

I was born in Chicago, IL in October 1964, the only boy and last child of my parents. My three older sisters were quite older than me, 14, 8 and 6 years. The family story is that when my mom brought me home from the hospital my sisters locked her out of the house because I was a boy not a girl! The other family story is my dad wasn't there when I was born – he was away on a business trip and put my mom in the hospital as a precaution in case she delivered early. Apparently, I was eager to get out and was born while dad was gone. Kind of ironic really.

As I've shared, my mother suffered from Multiple Sclerosis (MS). I had an older cousin tell me that my mom was advised to abort me because her MS would get significantly worse if she brought me to term. Mom had been raised a Catholic and was in a Lutheran church – there was no way she was going to have an abortion. I was born and my mother never walked on her own again, becoming bedridden soon afterwards. She basically gave up her life for mine.

Of course, I didn't know any of this and was raised primarily by my oldest sister who unfortunately for her had a ton of unfair responsibility to take care of three younger siblings after mom became too sick to care for us and dad being, well, dad. I loved my mom and I loved my sisters. The funny thing is I don't have a lot of memories of my dad until I was about five years old. The only real memory I have is that time I got in trouble I told you about and one time during a snow storm and the lights went out my dad did this really scary voice that freaked us all out!

I honestly don't know a lot about my dad's or mom's background. My dad's dad died about six years before I was born so I never met him. I have two memories of his mom – her taking me to Woolworth's for a milkshake and me looking for her hearing aid batteries in the shag carpet that she always seemed to drop. That's about it. My mom's parents, however, are quite vivid in my mind because when my dad went to jail the first time in my life, my mom and I were sent to live with them in Clearwater, FL while my three sisters were split up between other family members in Chicago.



I have about a dozen memories from Florida. My grandparents were good people, not the touchiest folks being German and all, but they took care of us. But I do remember it was really hard being away from my sisters. The very first prayer I remember praying was that God wouldn't let me wake up the next morning because I was so miserable—I was four. That was the beginning of the struggle I would have the rest of my life!

Dad eventually got out of jail – I don't know how long I was with my grandparents. There are old Polaroid pictures with the dates 1968 and 1969 on them so I assume it was that time frame. The reunion was great in my mind – I didn't know that dad was in jail, nobody told me where he was or really why we were separated. It just happened. But I was ecstatic we were all back together!

This is where it gets a little spotty for me. I think we moved back to Chicago for a while but for some reason we ended up moving across the country to California. I don't ever really remember my dad working, but the move was supposedly due to some job thing. The moving truck came and loaded up our stuff. That was the last we saw of it. Apparently, dad didn't pay the moving company and they kept all our belongings and probably auctioned it off. This wouldn't be the last time we lost everything we owned.

I have like three memories of California – we lived in Playa del Rey outside of LA. I have no idea how long we were there. But dad went to jail again and my two older sisters and I went to live with an uncle in Michigan. My eldest sister aged out and was on her own. Michigan was okay, but weird being in someone else's house. My aunt and uncle already had three kids so fitting in was hard. I remember feeling as if they didn't like us or maybe it was just me. I grew more isolated in that time. It was also when everyone learned I couldn't read or write; I had bounced around so many schools I never really learned. One day in class I was asked to read from a book out loud in front of the class and was humiliated because I couldn't. As all the other kids looked at me and snickered I felt shame, anger, embarrassment and more. The teacher was nice enough but the damage was done.

Again, I have no idea how long I was in Michigan or where I ended up after dad got out of jail again, but somehow, we moved to Portland, OR. This is when it got really crazy! Over the next few years, dad would go in and out of jail. He was a con man and would write bad checks, steal, and scam. When we lived with him, we would have our electricity turned off, not have food for days, not actually see him especially at night when he was drinking and womanizing, be evicted from the apartment and be pretty much homeless until dad found another place to live. When dad went to jail, we became wards of the court and back into foster care. During this time, I lived with at least five foster families that I can remember.

Some of the families were good and did their best to integrate me into their house. Some were bad and were just a warehouse for kids. Some were violent where I was hit, abandoned, emotionally abused, neglected, and in one particular place felt absolutely terrorized! My sisters and I were together at times and separated at others. In every case not only was I separated from my dad, but also separated from my mom – I wasn't able to visit her in the nursing home she was in for years at a time. That also kind of messed me up!

Somewhere in the back half of the 70s my dad got out of jail again and I went home to live with him. He decided he wanted to move back to Chicago. My middle sister had aged out by then and was on her own and my youngest sister decided she didn't want to go so she stayed with one of her families because she was 17 at the time I think and about to age out. She also had a very serious boyfriend who she would marry and with whom she had three incredible daughters. But dad and I went, and he took mom with us. The nursing homes she had been in were horrible – dirty, the smell of urine, cockroaches – just disgusting. Dad found a really decent place in the suburbs of Chicago called Friendship Village in Schaumburg, IL. We moved mom there and that is where she was until she passed on.

Chicago was the most bizarre experience and I got to see the extremes of my dad. He thought of himself as a real player and pretended he had money. We lived in hotels and ran up huge bills eating out every night, catching shows, and partying. We even stayed at the Playboy Club for about six weeks. But we also got kicked out of every place we stayed and would need to find someone's floor or couch to sleep on. During the two and a half years we were back home, I think I lived in at least six places that I remember. How many schools I went to I don't know. The only upside was I did get to see my mom. I idolized her and had set a goal that if I were able to make it out of college I would get a job that paid enough where I could bring her home to live with me instead of those lousy nursing homes.

Things were not great between my dad and me. I was a mouthy teenager who was getting tired of all the moving and nonsense that my dad was doing. One night I confronted him about it as we were going up the stairs to our apartment. He got pissed off at what I was saying and punched me in the head, knocking me down the flight of stairs. It was the first time since that spanking that I recall being hit by him, but still, you don't punch your teenage son in the head and knock him down the stairs! It was kind of the beginning of the end of our relationship.

Not long afterwards, my dad woke me up literally in the middle of the night and told me we were leaving. I was to grab as much stuff as I could because we were going. Where? Who knows. All I know is that night I lived in Chicago and the next morning after a couple cross-country plane rides I was in Bend, OR – which was in the middle of nowhere. Dad was running from the law and picked perhaps the most desolate spot he could find! Two of my sisters were still in Oregon about two plus hours away from where we were. It was nice seeing them again!

It took about six months, but the cops caught up with my dad. I got home one day from school and the old familiar realtor lock was on our apartment door. All our stuff had been confiscated and dad was nowhere to be seen. I arranged with the apartment manager to get my clothes and arranged with a sister to get a bus ticket to Portland and stay with her and my other sister.

When I arrived at the bus station I was met by this very nice detective who was looking for my dad. I hadn't seen or talked to him either so the detective and I had a Coke until my bus left. As the bus was turning out onto the street, I looked through the window and saw my dad being handcuffed and put in the squad car. That was the last time I lived with my dad – I was 14 years old.

Luckily for me, my sisters took me in. First my middle sister and then my youngest sister. They were just in their early 20s but were doing a lot better than me at the time! I enrolled in the local school – this would be the third school I'd be in for 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Things kind of normalized – I finished the school year, played on the junior varsity baseball team, and graduated to high school (in Oregon it was 6-9 for middle school and then 10-12 for high school).

Unfortunately for me, my sister and her family decided to move up to Washington state after that year while I wanted to stay in the same school district and continue to go to school with friends I had made. Then the most amazing thing happened. Out of the blue I ran into an old foster sister with whose family I had stayed several years earlier. She asked about my situation, checked with her parents and offered to let me live with them if I agreed to become a ward of the court again. Decisions decisions! As you can imagine, I wasn't thrilled about going back into the foster care system. I had complained to my case worker about the abuse and neglect and terrors I experienced in other homes in the past and was routinely ignored. I knew going back to this old home would be safe, but still, going back into the system would suck. However, I also knew that it was the only way I was going to be able to finish high school and go to college so I agreed – cost benefit analysis.

The next three years were actually kind of normal. I had a place to stay every night, I had food every day, I accumulated stuff like clothes and music, I excelled in school academically and socially, and to any outsider looked like any normal teenager. Of course, I wasn't but I play acted really well. I still felt as if I didn't fit in anywhere but was doing my best to keep my head down, do all the right things, and stay out of trouble until I could finish school.

Low and behold, I graduated high school! In fact, I graduated with a 3.56 GPA and had a moderate SAT score – good enough to get me into college! So, in August 1982, I left Oregon for the University of Missouri in Columbia. I had always wanted to be a Journalist and Mizzou had one of the top five journalism schools in the nation, and I was accepted! It sure looked as if I was on my way – I had survived foster care, was accepted to a prestigious university, would complete my degree and then go back home and get my mom! The plan seemed perfect.

When I got to school, I immediately joined a fraternity. I had planned to live in the dorm, but they roomed me with a guy that played the violin – there is no worse sound than one violin practicing! Instead, I pledged Alpha Epsilon Pi – a Jewish frat that had a Christian as its Master. I moved in that first night!

I had started drinking more heavily the summer before college. I was involved with a drum and bugle corps and we were touring California. One of my buddies and I were the partiers and we just drank a ton of beer that summer! It carried over when I got to Mizzou, but because of the fraternity culture it was normal. I had my own bar in my room with hard liquor and every weekend I just got hammered. I drank more and more as I realized that the promise my dad had made to pay my college bills was a lie. I had gotten a Pell Grant to pay my tuition and books, but dad had said he'd pay my housing. He didn't. The guys at the frat were gracious, but after one semester I was done – no money no college. I should have known better than to trust my dad to pay my bills, but I was so eager to go to college that I was willing to believe anything to enroll.

I was back in Oregon six months after leaving for school. I couch surfed for a while and worked baking cookies in the local mall. I had no transportation, was basically homeless, and couldn't make enough money to pay my old school bills or enroll in another school. Basically, I was that statistic I shared about foster kids – homeless, broke, with no opportunity. However, my situation turned when I was extremely blessed that an aunt of my last foster family offered to pay my Mizzou debts so I could enroll at the University of Oregon. I've always felt guilty that she did that but I am eternally grateful because it gave me a second chance I could not have pulled off on my own!



And this is where the wheels fell off. Up until this point, I was doing okay – not great, but okay. I had noticed that my mood had gone from a friendly fun guy in high school to a more serious, intense and aggressive person in college. I was drinking more and was generally unhappy. You saw in the first chapters of this book how our abuse/neglect can exhibit itself. Well, when I got to the University of Oregon, something in me snapped! A few years back I was preparing a PowerPoint presentation on mental health issues and came across these conditions. Boy, was it an eye opener!

### **General Causes of Abnormality**

- **Maternal Deprivation** – Especially orphans who are institutionalized and/or abandoned by their natural parents – *Check!*
- **Pathological Family Patterns** – Maladaptive family behavior (e.g. faulty role model) that the child imitates and internalizes; faulty relationships between parent and child (e.g. overprotective, domineering, alcoholic and/or emotionally abusive parents, etc.) – *Check!*
- **Psychic Trauma** – An early childhood traumatic experience is repressed (e.g. abandonment, death or divorce, sexual abuse, etc.) and then resurfaces later as a disorder. – *Check!*
- **Severe Stress** – Extreme pressure on the coping mechanisms that take a destructive toll on psychological processes (e.g. posttraumatic stress disorder resulting from combat, captivity, torture, natural disasters, being kidnapped or terrorized, including child abuse) – *Check!*
- **Separation Anxiety Disorder** – Essential feature is the onset of excessive anxiety upon separation from home or close personal attachments. Anxiety manifest is greater than what is expected of individuals at a similar maturational level – *Check!*
- **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder** – Manifested by re-experiencing of an extremely traumatic event accompanied by symptoms of increased arousal and by avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma – *Check!*

- **Personality Disorder** – Indicated by a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others, such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent. Events and the actions of others are interpreted in the most negative light possible, and convictions of other's hostility are based on little or no objective evidence – *Check!*
- **Borderline Personality Disorder** – Indicated by a pervasive pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships or self-image and affects, accompanied by marked impulsivity with an onset in early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts. Individuals will often be intensely concerned with abandonment and will go to great lengths to avoid real or imagined abandonment. The perception of impending loss, rejection, separation, or abandonment or the loss of external stability and structure can produce profound alterations in self-image, affect, cognition, and behavior – *Check!*
- **Narcissistic Personality Disorder** – Characterized by a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy, with an onset of early adulthood and manifest in a variety of contexts. The individual has an exaggerated sense of self-importance, often displaying a conceited, boastful demeanor while overestimating his/her abilities and accomplishments – *Check!*

Now I'm not saying I had all these conditions – I never went to a shrink to find out! But I recognize myself in each of these disorders and I think those closest to me in my life probably would agree that I was suffering from most of it!

Have you ever seen one of those Jack-in-the-Box toys? The box has a handle on the side and you wind it and that really annoying song starts playing and as tension builds you just wait for that creepy clown to pop out? My life at 18-years-old was like someone slowly turning my handle and that creepy clown was about to appear.

I really don't know how best to describe how I went from the proverbial Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde during the next few years of my life. If you are unfamiliar with that reference, it's from a great horror story about a doctor who makes a formula that turns him from a normal person into his evil antithesis. Like the story, there were times I was like Dr. Jekyll – fairly normal and able to function within the norms of society – and then there were times I was Mr. Hyde – raging with anger, controlling, manipulating, self-medicating, paranoid, hypervigilant, accusatory, jealous, violent, and pretty much out of control. As uncomfortable as this may be, I'm going to share some stories from my Mr. Hyde moments to show you just how bad I was so that when we get to Chapter 9 you'll be able to really see how healing works.

### **The Rage**

There is a line in one of the Avenger movies where they are talking with the Bruce Banner character and they need him to turn into the Hulk. To do so, they need him to get angry. Banner looks at the group and says, "That's the secret, I'm always angry!" Next thing you know, he transforms into the Hulk. Well, I relate to that.

There was always this quiet rage in me. I thought it was the fire that fueled my desire to succeed and survive foster care. Every insult, every slight, every humiliation just fed the fire in me. But when I got out of foster care the rage didn't go away, it was released!

It's not like it wasn't there when I was younger though. I remember a time when I was really angry just at life. I would go out at night to this garden store near my apartment complex. I would jump the fence and then use a pocket knife I had to cut open all the various bags of bark dust, mulch and other products. I would go back every couple night and cut them up again.

I also made a home-made sling shot. I took a wire hanger, some rubber bands and a piece of cloth, bent the hanger into a "Y" and then strung the rubber bands between the two ends, with the cloth connected to the rubber hands in the middle. Then I would go to the store after collecting cans and buy a pint carton of BBs. They made awesome projectiles! My targets included windows, cars, houses, and whatever else got in my sights.

I guess vandalism was just a way for me to express that rage when I was younger. It got worse when I got older and into college.

I remember that I had this girlfriend in college. She was my world, but I had no business being in a relationship as damaged as I was. Unfortunately for both of us, I didn't know or understand that at the time. We were having a fight – we fought a lot because I actually liked to fight. Somehow or another I just lost it. It went from anger to uncontrollable rage. I remember tearing a t-shirt I had off my body. She ran into a bedroom. I followed and punched the door in my rage. Very scary for her I'm sure. It wasn't the first time she had seen my anger. I had punched holes in walls and doors in my anger before. I had screamed at her and basically emotionally abused her over the years. This one, however, was different. It was the first time I had seen that rage released like that. And, it was the moment I knew I lost that girl forever. Not that I blame her at all – nobody and I mean NOBODY should put up with that kind abuse. Even while I was in the middle of that rage it was like I was looking down on it from a third-person kind of view and asking myself, "What are you doing??" I just couldn't control it – I couldn't stop myself which was pretty frightening!

But the rage also exhibited in other less visible ways. When I felt rejected, slighted, humiliated and more, I would just smolder for days or weeks at a time – just pissed off – making everyone around me miserable as well. I would snap at people, be mean-spirited, start arguments, be manipulative to make others feel bad and more.

I remember this one time I was in a mall with this girlfriend. A group of people about our age were just staring at us – or at least that's what I perceived. I shouted out at them, "Take a picture it lasts longer!" I was hoping they would take the bait but they didn't.

Another time, this girlfriend and I were walking down a street and some guy in a car rolls up and yells out the window at her, "Nice call!" in a very sarcastic voice. My girlfriend was a soccer referee and apparently the guy was a player who didn't like the call. My first instinct when he yelled at her was to go kick his a\*\*. I was LIVID! My girlfriend's response probably kept me out of jail. She said, "If you fight him I'm leaving you." I walked away but not before sharing some thoughts I had about the guy.

You may see a pattern here. I think we tend to be even more emotionally unstable when it comes to intimates in our life. Those closest to us can bring out the best in us and the very worst in us. I've seen the evil in me and it is not how I want to live my life. It's just ugly and costly.

### **Homicidal Ideation**

I shared earlier that there is suicidal ideation – thinking about killing yourself – and there is homicidal ideation – thinking of killing others. I don't want to get into details here because my stories would sound absolutely lock-him-up crazy! But let's just say I had some very violent fantasies about how I would get revenge on people who had done me wrong. Not just my abusers, but anyone who crossed me, such as a college professor, classmate, co-worker, stranger, anyone. I lived this violent world in my head where I was fine until someone challenged me, wrongly accused me, embarrassed me, or tried to humiliate me.

Okay, I'll tell one story that is tame enough. I was playing trumpet in the University of Oregon basketball band. I wasn't any good but good enough to play at the end of the trumpet line. The lead trumpet player and I never really got along. He was an upper classman with an arrogant attitude. Honestly, he wasn't that good of a player but he thought he was. During one of the songs, I decided to play an octave higher than the music called for. I was getting bored playing in the lower register – I had great chops so I decided to scream a bit. After the game ended, I was talking with someone and this guy comes over and starts to berate me in front of everyone about how I didn't have the authority to play like I did.

I snapped.



He was a very lucky man that there was a crowd of 5,000 people there or he would have been in the hospital or worse. He did get bull-rushed, chest-bumped, challenged to fight, and he got a personal understanding of the fear of God put in him. To this day even telling the story kind of ticks me off about that guy! Such a jerk. But it was the wrong thing for both of us to do. I was “asked” to leave the basketball band after that, which I gladly did. For years after that incident I thought about what I’d do to that guy if I ever caught him in an alley.

Luckily, today I just think back on it and shake my head about how two young bucks nearly locked horns over something pretty stupid. That said, I still like to play in the upper register and nobody can tell me I can’t!

### **Controller**

One of the ways we stay safe is controlling our environment. I was a master at this and used several techniques depending on the situation.

With my girlfriend, I tried to control EVERYTHING. What she wore, who she was friends with, where she went, how she acted, where she worked, her hobbies, how much time she spent with her family – I mean EVERYTHING. As we discussed, we try to stay safe by controlling the environment, but the more you try to control people the more they want to break away. As you can imagine, she resented this quite a bit!

With people, however, I used a different technique – I controlled the conversation. Anytime I was in a group, I would be the guy telling the stories, making everyone laugh and basically being the center of attention. My motive wasn't to be the funniest guy in the room; my motive was to control what was being said so I wouldn't be hurt, embarrassed, or humiliated by someone who made me the butt of the joke or said something that would trigger me. It was calculated and based completely on my fear of being humiliated in front of people.

When I was criticized or attacked, one of my best techniques was to manipulate the conversation in such a way as to make the other person feel as if they were actually the one who was wrong. Having grown up around a con man, I was very adept at arguing and turning the tables on people. I can be very convincing and very intimidating which of course worked to my advantage. And when I couldn't get out of the situation that way I'd just get angry and push the other person away because of my bad behavior.

All of it was about controlling my environment so that I would not be emotionally hurt. The wounds I had were just so deep that any injury to them – no matter how slight – were extremely painful and damaging. The best method I could come up with to protect myself was just to try to control everything which obviously will never work. You can't control other people and what they do no matter how much you try! Eventually those people will just leave you which then creates its own abandonment wounds. It's a zero-sum game – you can't win.

### Trust

I trusted NO ONE. I didn't care if you were a family member, my oldest friend, my significant other or whoever else. I had been betrayed so many times that I wasn't about to give anyone the opportunity to do it again. I put up a significant barrier with people. I shined them on but never would let them close enough to me to hurt me. The only person that got that close was that girlfriend, but I brutalized her for it. And God help you if you did betray me – you were cut off. Dead to me. It's sad to say, but there are people with whom I've not connected with in decades because of this – I just cut them loose. As we've said, though, you know you can't have relationship without trust so you end up feeling absolutely alone and as if nobody understands you. Of course, they don't! You're nuts!

This one was one of the hardest to work through. Years after foster care in my adult professional life I had a situation where I was working as a private investigator. One my colleagues and I became pretty good friends and at one point I shared some confidential information with him and told him explicitly not to share it with *anyone*. Of course, he did. I never spoke to him again – that was 15 years ago! I've forgiven him, but I certainly would never trust him again and I feel stupid for doing so in the first place. I feel as if I should have known better.

I had another situation when I was new to politics and was being interviewed by a reporter about my candidate for the Oregon House of Representatives. I didn't know much about politics at the time so I fell for an old trick I'd never seen. The reporter asked me a hypothetical question – if my boss were to raise taxes which tax would he raise? Of course, my boss wouldn't raise taxes and I told the guy that, but he persisted with the hypothetical question. So, I came up with something. DUMB. He wrote an article saying my boss would raise that particular tax. I nearly went out to find that reporter to beat him to death for taking advantage of me like that. It all worked out – my guy still won the election. But the reporter had been a political operative in his past for the other party and when he got back into partisan politics I made sure to try to throw chairs in his way anytime I could. Not a guy I would ever trust again.

The problem with trusting people is people suck. They will betray you so you have to be really discerning with who you trust and how much trust you give because when someone violates that trust it really messes with our heads. That being said, you have to learn to trust – you cannot have relationship without it as we've discussed.

For years, I had like three people I could trust. Then it was two. Then one of the remaining two died. Luckily, I have found some healing in this area and I've learned to trust in degrees so there are now a small group of people I could trust with my life, another group I would trust with most of the things in my life, and yet another group I trust with the daily things of life. It's a comfortable mix – imagine living a life where you could be comfortable trusting people! That's an amazing turn around at least for me!

### **Self-Medicating**

My dad drank every night. In his prime, he drank an entire fifth of scotch nightly! We couldn't afford food, but he always had enough for booze. Drinking was a norm in my life so it was no surprise that I did it often. I had my first drink at 14 years old but I really didn't drink that much during high school. I can only remember two parties where we drank beer and one night where I made the monumental mistake of mixing Southern Comfort with Dr. Pepper. Live and learn! After high school, however, was a different story. Remember, my PTSD didn't hit me until I aged out. Basically, I binged on the weekends. I actually hated parties – I would find a convenient time to slip out when nobody was watching and then just go drink by myself. I much preferred to be alone when I drank or with just one or two other people with whom we could have deep conversations. But I did drink regularly and in large amounts for the sole purpose of trying to get my mind to stop thinking about the past. Just deaden the pain. Self-medicating, however, can get you in real trouble.

One night I was drinking tequila poppers with these three girls. I knew two of them from high school and one was a friend of theirs. Everything was going fine until we ran out of tequila. I started in mixing vodka and amaretto, which was surprisingly good! That is pretty much the last I remembered until the next morning. I work up half dressed. I had cuts across my chest, rug burns on my knees and elbows and the girls were nowhere to be seen. I knew I must have done something really bad, so I cleaned up the house and went out for donuts and coffee for the girls. One of them got up and asked me if I remembered what I had done the night before. I didn't. She wouldn't tell me. Later in the day when we were all awake they told me. I had been on the floor on my hands and knees, barking like a dog and biting them. I also had a knife that I was showing them wasn't sharp by dragging it across my chest. Doh – how embarrassing. What a dumb-a\*\* I was! Luckily, they all had a sense of humor after they locked themselves in the bedroom and forgave me.

Another night I nearly got a DUI. I was actually in a bar with my dad reconciling the past – well, the best we could. At the end of about five hours of drinking, we shook hands, hugged and said good night. I was plowed! But I still had to drive home. I decided to take some back streets because I knew I had no business being in a car, but I had done it before so I was confident that I could make it home.

As I rolled up to a stop light, I noticed a cop in a lane over from me and two cars back pulling up. I could see that he was eyeing me. I thought I was dead to rights, but also knew that he couldn't immediately get behind me to pull me over. I did my best James Bond – I turned on my blinker, went left at the light and proceeded to turn left and right through a neighborhood to lose the guy. I did this several times and then parked my car in someone's driveway like I lived there, turned off the engine and slunk down in the seat. Then I waited and waited and waited. I must have sat there for an hour before I figured it was safe to get back on the road again. I really think I dodged a bullet there and by the time I started back up I was still drunk but sober enough to drive better! Dumb, dumb, dumb. I could have hurt someone, which is what really bothers me about all the drunk driving. Like the time after a major wedding bash and I had to drive coastal highways to a house we were staying in several miles away. I have no recollection of that drive. I must have used the force! All kidding aside, God must have had the wheel because I shouldn't have made it!

There are probably a 100 more stories from my drinking days like this. I can't tell you how many times I drove when I shouldn't have. So many nights of pounding beers, Rum and Cokes, White Russians, Long Island Ice Teas, blended B-52s and more. Luckily, I was always a happy and fun drunk until I got depressed and then I would do that dumb call the ex thing and embarrass myself.

But here's the thing. No matter how much I drank the memories were there the next day. There's this great saying that goes like this, "No matter where you go, there you are!" It means that no matter what you do, your stuff is going to be with you. For me, I drank to ease my mind but it never really did. It just masked it for short periods of time and then it was back.

I stopped drinking 23 years ago. It was my choice – kind of. I had a medication error that caused a life-threatening ulcer in my stomach and during an emergency surgery about half my stomach and some of my intestines were removed. The docs said I could still drink, but God had other plans – if I drink I get really ill. So, I'm sober and I deal with my pain in two ways. First, I've worked on healing the causes of my pain so I actually don't have the same pain. Second, in the areas of my life where there still is pain I use it for the good of other people. I'll get into that shortly.

Okay, that's enough war stories. I think you can see from the tip of the iceberg that I am showing you that I was not in my right mind. I was significantly damaged by my childhood abuse/neglect/abandonment and more. And because of my emotional instability, I pretty much lost everything that mattered to me. This is what my post-foster care life looked like:



- I had to leave Mizzou because I couldn't pay my bills
- I pretty much flunked out of the University of Oregon Music School because I wouldn't put the time into the classes. I actually cut a deal with the school that I wouldn't come back if they would raise my grades from Ds to C minuses. They were actually happy to do so!
- I finished the Journalism School program at Oregon but was not awarded my degree because my GPA was too low (2.35 instead of the required 2.5).
- I lost the girl I wanted to marry due to my anger, jealousy, insecurities, and control issues.
- I failed in my true-life goal of bringing my mother out of the nursing home before she died; mom passed during my junior year of college – I hadn't seen her in a couple years, and during that trip she was so far gone she didn't recognize me, even asking me if I knew her son. Brutal.
- I left school the same way I came: broke, homeless, and with very few options.

I recently wrote a blog where I lamented that youth is wasted on the young! Imagine if you could go back knowing then what you know now! I actually wish I could so I could clean up the mess I made. Here is what I would have done differently:

I would have...

- Sought counseling for my conditions
- Stayed out of relationships until I was healthy enough for one
- Stopped drinking
- Submitted myself to appropriate authorities at school and work
- Gone to class instead of focusing on outside activities, such as newspapers, karate, and girls
- Learned to have real friendships
- Learned self-control and discipline
- Been driven but to the right things
- Worked in order to pay my bills in college
- Focused on my faith instead of trying to satisfy my ego

As you can see, I was a complete failure after I aged out. I made bad decisions relationally, emotionally, professionally, educationally, financially, and personally. I lost everything that was important to me because of it. I lost my mom, I lost the girl, I lost my degree, I lost my investment, I lost time, I lost friends, I lost job opportunities, and I lost what felt like part of my soul because of it all.

I also lost my integrity.

### Post-College Life

I “finished” my Journalism program and I decided to “walk” for graduation just to stick it to the Journalism school. Because I had completed all the courses with passing grades, I was allowed to walk even though they wouldn’t grant me a degree. I even petitioned the school, arguing that all my professional work should count for something! Nope! So, I lied to my family about graduating, walked across the platform, shook their hand and accepted the blank piece of paper.

I moved to California after school. My youngest sister had been my support base during college, but now I was going to hang out with my middle sister in the East Bay area of northern California. At first, I worked as a security guard, but I lied about my degree and got a job as the editor of the weekly newspaper The Millbrae Sun and Burlingame Leader. The paper was located just off the tarmac of the San Francisco airport. I made grossed \$1,500 a month; a studio apartment in the area cost \$1,200 a month! This is why I got that car at 18 percent interest – I needed somewhere to sleep! I would stay a few days in Millbrae, sleeping in my car or in the office, and then drive back to Antioch about two hours away and get cleaned up and new clothes. All I could afford to eat was bologna and bread with cheap cookies. I was lucky that I knew the guy at the Domino’s Pizza who would slip me a free pie every once in a while.

It was a very difficult time. While I was a pretty good reporter and writer, I sucked at being an editor. College had not prepared me for running a weekly newspaper. I was incredibly lonely and I was still drinking a lot to help mask the craziness of my condition as well as the trouble I was having my boss.

There is always friction between a publisher and an editor – we have two different jobs. His job is to fund the paper through advertising and classified ads; my job is to fill the paper with news, sports, and features. There is always conflict about the percentage of ad space to the percentage of editorial space. It didn't help that we were on completely different ends of the spectrum politically either. He was a super liberal and I was a young conservative so the editorial board policy was a battle.

Because of my emotional issues, I was convinced he didn't like me and I had a hard time accepting his authority. This was my perception and probably not at all close to reality. I took all his corrections as unfair criticism and fought him everywhere I could. Not exactly how you want to go about your first job after college! What I didn't know was that I was hired for a very specific reason. The San Francisco Chronical newspaper had a union and it wanted to unionize our production shop. The publisher didn't want the union in his family-owned newspaper and hired editors to help fight the union. Long story short, management won the union vote and then they started purging the new editors from their positions.

They couldn't outright fire me; I wasn't great but was good enough. What they did, however, was set me up. I had one reporter and she left for another job. Instead of hiring another reporter, they made me publish the paper by myself until I'd collapse. I made it six issues before I quit. I knew what they were doing and I was determined to prove them wrong – I could do it by myself. But in the end, I was just too exhausted by the 85-90-hour weeks so I gave in. When I did, they were so nice to me! The publisher's daughter even said, "We were surprised you made it so long!" They offered to give me a great review for any other job I applied for and wished me well. I lasted there a total of six months!

There I was – an unemployed, homeless, non-degreed journalist with suicidal and homicidal tendencies, struggling with emotional and mental health issues which I treated with alcohol. What exactly do you do with that?

Of course, you join the Army!

My father had served in the Army, which never was a big deal in the family, but his brother had been a gunner on a B-17 during World War II and was shot down on his 9<sup>th</sup> mission. Uncle Bob was a Prisoner of War at Stalag 17 where he was severely abused not only as a POW but as a Jewish POW – Bob's last name was Goldman and my dad's family was Jewish.

Everyone knew about Bob; he was the uncle with whom we lived in Michigan. I had always admired his service even though I had never thought about joining the military in high school. I did think about it in college. In fact, a buddy and I were going to join the Marines after the Marine barracks in Beirut was bombed. When we sobered up the next morning, we promised each other we would never make important decisions while drinking ever again!

It was different at 22 years old, though. Once again, I was out of decent options, so I went to the recruiter's office. They treated me like it was Christmas, and I was their favorite present. The recruiters didn't have to do any convincing; I told them I wanted to join and the wheels got rolling. I passed the entrance exam (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery – ASVAB) and was told I could do anything in the military except touch equipment – I failed in mechanical ability! Then I took an officer's board test, which I passed so I could become an officer someday. Then I took a language aptitude test called the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) and I passed that with a score that allowed me to learn the most difficult languages. I signed up in April 1987 and shipped out in July of that year for beautiful Fort Dix, NJ for Basic Training.

My friends thought I was nuts joining the Army. What they didn't know was that I was literally nuts and needed to join the Army!

Now, let's be honest – it's really hard to screw up in the Army, but I managed! I got through Basic Training just fine and headed off to Monterey, CA to the Defense Language Institute (DLI) where I would learn Russian for the next year. It was great and when I say great, I mean Freaking Fantastic! I LOVED DLI and everything about the Army. I met great friends with whom I worked hard and played even harder. Most were as messed up or more than me! I thought I had finally found a home and would be a “lifer” in the service – right up until I started having knee pain.

I had been playing intramural basketball for my company; sports are a major deal in the military and company commanders take great pride in having the best teams. We were the best team, but my knees began swelling up after each practice, the right knee worse than the left. It got to the point that I could not take enough aspirin or Motrin to kill the pain or knock down the swelling. I also had had my shoulder pulled out of the socket and put back in during a game so I was a little banged up. The docs looked at the knee, did some tests and then decided I needed exploratory surgery. They scoped the right knee and learned that all the cartilage had disintegrated and my right knee cap was cracking in half in the back. They figured the left knee was the same. The right shoulder had what they called “impingement syndrome” which means it didn't work right any more. My military career was over almost as quickly as it started; I was medically discharged.

I did get to finish my studies at DLI, which was extremely unusual. Once you're going to the medical board, you're usually pulled out of the regular mix and given exciting duties such as painting rocks and guarding empty buildings. My commander and First Sergeant fought for me to stay in school – I had completed nine months and only had three months left to go. Remarkably the brass said yes!

It was great news, but I was still a loser. I had joined the Army because I was homeless and jobless and needed something to do with my life. The previous nine months had been a series of painful episodes. My foster brother from high school paralyzed himself in a motorcycle accident; my grandmother in Florida had died, the rumor being she committed suicide because she was so lonely; and now I was being “riffed” (kicked out) from the Army because I was broken and defective. I was about at the end of my rope.

But I wasn't ready to admit that I couldn't soldier anymore. I actually wanted to stay in the Army but knew as busted up as I was that I would never be a real soldier and I couldn't deal with that. One day, I decided to prove I could still soldier and began jogging around the base track. I was going slow, making sure I didn't push it too hard when I was lapped by these two – um – larger girls. That was it – at that moment I completely broke. I went up to my barracks in tears. I was done.

I was 23 years old and this is what I thought my future looked like as I prepared to leave the Army:



- No Job
- No Degree
- Disabled Veteran
- No Prospects
- No Support System
- No Money
- Homeless
- Embarrassment of Failing the Army
- Feeling as if I Was a Quitter
- No Self-Esteem
- Depression Due to Physical Injuries and Loss of Abilities
- Needed Medication to Function
- No Goals
- No Real Hope

I figured at the time it would just be best to kill myself. Nobody would really miss me at that point in my life anyway and it all just seemed so worthless.

However, I obviously didn't commit suicide. Something happened that fundamentally changed my life when I returned to my barracks after that humiliating attempt at running around the base track.

Before I tell you that story, I want to let you know that this is not some kind of bait and switch thing. I wrote the previous eight chapters in good faith to share with you some of the potholes you may hit post foster care and give you some tips on how to navigate this new world in which you will find yourself. However, the back end of my story can't be told without including what happened in my faith life.

If you've been reading between the lines, you have figured out that I'm a Christian. This book is not meant to convert you to my faith, but I am going to share how my faith helped me find healing instead of just trying to manage of all the stuff I was going through. Before you get put off by that, let me share that a 2016 study at the United States Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD found that spirituality can play a significantly positive role in a person's recovery.<sup>[20]</sup> Further, one study of veterans being treated for PTSD found that negative religious coping and lack of forgiveness were both associated with worse PTSD and depression symptoms.<sup>[21]</sup>

Faith may or may not be your thing. But take a risk and read the next chapter because you may just find some advice in it that will help you break out of the day-to-day grind of just trying to control your dysfunction and get to a place of true healing.

### Chapter 9 - Healing vs. Management

All good military stories start out, “So, there I was...” So, there I was, up in my barracks a completely broken man ready to kill himself. I decided to pray one last time to see if God had anything to say to me. Here’s what I said, “God, if you have some kind of plan for me, you better show it to me right now because I’m done!”

That’s when it happened.

It wasn’t an audible voice but it certainly wasn’t me talking to myself in my head either! Jesus answered me!

“Tom, all I’ve ever wanted to do is carry you and you wouldn’t let me!”

He was right. My theology got pretty messed up in all the foster homes I was in. My mom was a Catholic who married a Jew, but my dad left the faith and was one of those angry atheists. My mom became a Lutheran, probably because the Catholics were upset she married a Jew! I was christened/baptized in the Lutheran church as a child, but was raised in an Assembly of God home, a Baptist Home, a Catholic Home (twice), and homes with no religion whatsoever. My relationship with God during all those years was me shaking my fist at Him over everything He was doing to my mom, to me, and to my sisters.

In my wrong thinking about God, I believed that God knocked you down so that you could prove you were worthy of Him. Church taught me about separating the silver from the dross, meaning making you pure enough for God. Church taught about bearing your cross and suffering in order to learn and be prepared for what God has for you. Church taught that God disciplines those He loves. Church taught that the sins of the father are passed down to three generations. That was my understanding of God. I always talked to God and our conversations pretty much went like this: “You can knock me down as many times as you want, God, but you’ll never beat me!” It was me against God, and I was determined to win!

Until that day in my barracks.

To this point in my life, I had been doing the best I knew how to manage my issues. I drank to kill the pain; I used anger to keep people away; I controlled and manipulated to keep people from hurting me; I had every defense mechanism known to mankind to protect me from anything that could possibly happen; I fought every fight and every person who challenged me in anyway. But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t manage this stuff any longer. My ego was shot, my self-esteem was at zero, my pride was battered, my emotions were unhinged, the future was bleaker than bleak and I was literally without hope.

Then Jesus tells me that He’s been trying to help me my entire life and I wouldn’t let Him. I had treated Him just like I had treated everyone else – I didn’t trust Him, kept Him at arm’s length, and tried to do it all on my own without His help.

### In a moment with Jesus I learned something that changed my life: **Only God Can Heal a Broken Soul**

You see, you can call all the conditions I had by whatever clinical name you want, but my problem was not PTSD, Abandonment Syndrome, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Maternal Deprivation and all the rest. My problem was I had a broken soul and I had been trying to hold it together in ways that could never and would never work! Only God can heal a broken soul, because only God created your soul and when it is broken by evil in this crazy world, we have to go back to the maker for repairs! I had never even considered asking God to heal me in all my pain, because I had been convinced He was the reason I was going through all that pain. I was wrong about God and wrong about the reason I went through what I did. When I figure that part out, I also figured out that God not only could but would heal me if I just gave Him the chance.

God answered me that day in my barracks. I had done all the “religious” things – gone to church, sang in the choir, did youth group and catechism, and even preached once – but I had never allowed Jesus into my life. He was just another one of “Them” in the me-versus-the-world scenario I had created. Jesus wasn’t necessarily the enemy, but He certainly wasn’t necessarily a friend either. When this changed, so did my life.

If you are willing, I want to encourage you to read on to see what God did not just for me but *to me* to turn me from a literal raving lunatic into someone who is *relatively* normal and functional and sincerely grateful to be healed!

First off, God told me that those who have found their way out of the dark have a responsibility to go back into the dark and lead others to the light as well. That has become my life's mission. I have been in very dark places, and God helped me find my way out where no human could. So now, with His help, I share with others what God shared with me. Here is where the rubber meets the road. You have a decision to make. Do you want to live your life the way you've been living it – just surviving day to day, week to week, month to month and year to year? Or, do you want to be healed so you can live a life that God planned for you regardless of your past, the abuse, the pain, and the hurt? It's your choice! Read on if you choose healing.

There are several steps to the healing process – remember, we're not just trying to manage our issues at this point, we are trying to find true healing which means we have to risk in order to gain. Let me outline what we're going to talk about:

- Faith
- Forgiveness
- Prayer
- Transformation
- Spiritual Warfare
- Your True Identity

### Faith

Faith is hard for former foster kids because it involves trust. To have faith you have to trust in something you can't tangibly see, feel, hear or touch. Your experience with trust isn't so good so why would you risk trusting in something that isn't there?

Further, if a father or father-figure was part of your abuse there is a tendency to project your distrust of fathers on God the Father – it's normal.

Faith is a weird thing in that you don't experience it with your five senses you experience it with your soul! But to start, we must address the elephant in the room: If there is an all-powerful God, where was He when you were getting abused and why didn't He stop it? Believe me, I asked this question a lot as a kid!

There are two distinct answer to this question, both of which take a little explanation so stick with me here.

First, God was right there with you. I know that sounds crazy, but know that God loves all children, He commands against abusing them, and suffers with us when we're abused! Where was God? Right beside you.

If that is true, why didn't He stop the abuse?

That leads to the second part. God gave everyone free will – people can choose to do good or they can choose to do evil. If God took away one person's free will He'd have to take away everyone's free will. The problem with that is God wants us to love Him and without free will we can't choose to do so. Without free will, God would be forcing us into relationship which is not a relationship. Your abuser(s) forced relationship on you. Instead, God allows us to have free will – to choose good or evil, to love Him or not love Him.

Why can't God just take away the free will of the evil people?

Because we're all evil – we all sin – we all fall short of the God's perfection. Not one of us is righteous. It's an all or nothing deal. Either we all get free will or none of us do.

Let's get back to where God was when you were being abused and why He didn't stop it. I think about my own abuse this way: I imagine what would have happened to me had God *not* been there! Because God was there, I suffered only what I could suffer; He did not allow more than that.



Sure, it screwed me up, but God has used my past in remarkable ways! I've written a book about how God heals people; I've counseled others on healing from abuse; I've lectured on the topic, bringing people to a place where they can find healing and more. God has done REMARKABLY MIRACULOUS things in my life because of what I suffered not in spite of it. The Bible says God will use all things for the good of those who love Him. My pain and experiences have helped more people than I can count because I allow God to use it for His purpose. Today I can see that my past is what allows me to connect to people that others can't because I have experiences that speak to those people's condition. Without my past I couldn't really help anyone! I'm not going to say it was great going through what I went through – it wasn't – but I will say it has been great seeing how God has used my past to help other...including you via this book!

Let's go a little deeper. Yes, I know that some kids have been killed by their parents and their foster parents. It's pure evil! These children are with God in heaven. Honestly, I can't explain why God allows such evil, but I can say this: I know He will bring good out of it somehow someday that is beyond my understanding. God is God and I am not – I don't get to know all the answers until I get to heaven. Until then, I just have to have faith that God knows what He's doing – and yes, it's hard to have that kind of faith, especially in the face of such evil!

But here's the other part that gives me comfort. God's justice is perfect. That means that those who used their free will to do evil will pay for it. God's justice is better than anything I could come up with to do to some of my abusers even with my homicidal ideation! I fully believe that. If those abusers are not believers, they will spend an eternity suffering themselves for what they did! If they are believers and have confessed their sin, sought forgiveness and turned from their evil ways, then God will still serve justice because they will not receive rewards in heaven as they would have had they been obedient and not transgressed against you and me. Either way, they lose and God's justice for our pain is served.

Personally, I'm good with that. I'm okay that evil people acted against me, I survived because it was God's will, He's used all that evil for good in my life and the lives of others through me, and God will punish those who did me wrong. That works for me emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Honestly, faith was the only thing that got me through 12 homes, five states, untold numbers of schools, physical abuse, emotional abuse, abandonment, homelessness, hunger, humiliation, PTSD, suicidal/homicidal ideation, rage, poverty, and loss. Had God not been in my life I would have ended it decades ago.

Here is the challenge: If you believe in God that is fantastic! What I'm about to walk you through may be familiar and more comfortable. If you don't believe in God or have no idea who this Jesus guy is, stay with me and see if you'd like to meet Him once I show you what He can really do!

### Forgiveness

In my life I have lied, cheated, stolen, been violent, abused people, been arrogant and prideful, and have broken nearly every single law of God and a bunch of laws of man! Yet, I am forgiven for all I have done, am doing, and will ever do wrong. I need to share with you how this works so you can find forgiveness in your lives because unforgiveness is a cancer that will eat you alive but forgiveness is a cure that will heal your heart and soul!

Think about God this way: He made us to be in relationship with Him. We rebelled against Him and did everything He told us not to do kind of like a 2 year old! God continually asked us to stop rebelling against Him and accept His love. We told Him to stick it. What should God do with us? Well, at one point He wiped out the entire creation except for Noah and his family and started over. That makes sense to me! Yet, that is not what God wants to do. The Bible tells us He wants to save us from ourselves because we are too stupid to even understand what we are doing!

But God is not just love as some people like to portray Him. God also is holy, righteous, and just. This means that while He is love He is these other things and more at the very same time. Like a child who rebels against a parent, God cannot allow us just to rebel without being disciplined.

Imagine if you just let your kid run amuck! You see some of those kids at Walmart sometimes and you just want to grab their parent by the scruff of the neck and say, "Get control of your freaking kid, would you!" Well, rebelling against the God who made the universe is bad! The punishment is severe! And you and I and everyone else on this earth deserve to be punished for it. The earth is like a giant Walmart, and we're all just down here running around screaming, pulling crap off the shelves and causing general mayhem!

Yet, like any parent, God loves us. He doesn't really want to punish us. It truly does hurt Him more than it hurts us! So, how could God get justice for all of this rebellion yet at the same time save us from the deaths we deserve?

This is where Jesus comes in!

Imagine you're arrested and the judge finds you guilty and is about to sentence you to death for your crime. Just before he pronounces the sentence, Jesus walks in and tells the judge and jury that yes, you're guilty, but He would like to take your punishment for you and let you go free for the rest of your life. Would you allow Jesus to do that for you?

That is what Jesus did for us. God declared us guilty of rebelling against Him – being His enemy – yet Jesus loved us so much that He told the Father that He would take the punishment we deserve so that we can be forgiven and be reconciled to the Father. In other words, He took our place, was beaten, tortured, mocked, spit on, humiliated, nailed to a cross, and died so that God could forgive us our rebellion and satisfy the need that justice be done.

You are forgiven – all you need to do is ask God for it, and it is granted when you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

This is a BIG deal in our healing!!

Show of hands, how many of you suffer from guilt, shame, regret, and/or embarrassment of your actions, unresolved conflict or issues, and perhaps a sense of dislike of who you are? I know I did. But when I realized that all of this and more could be forgiven by simply believing that Jesus took my punishment for me and that I am now free, it changed my world!

I don't have guilt anymore. I regret things I did, but I know that God does not hold them against me because of what Jesus did. I am reconciled not only with God but with my past. Imagine if when you thought about your past you could do so without emotion, with a sense of calm and ease, with acceptance of what was and not have it raise all those negative emotions in you! That, my friends, is freedom and that freedom only comes through God's forgiveness of you!

Let me take a deeper dive into forgiveness so you can find the freedom that heals!

There are four areas of forgiveness in our lives:

- God Forgives Us
- We Forgive Others
- We Ask Others to Forgive Us
- We Forgive Ourselves

### ***God Forgives Us***

We've talked a bit about why we need God's forgiveness and how it works in the pages above. All I want to do here is ask you one more question: Do you want healing or not? If so, pray this prayer so that God can do a miracle in you!

*“Father – I come before you broken – a sinner. I have rebelled against you in ways that I don't even know. I need healing in my body, in my mind, and in my soul. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior who took my punishment for me so that you, Father, and I could be reconciled. I ask that you forgive me based on what Jesus did for me. Forgive me for the things I know I have done, the things I knew I should do and didn't, and the things I probably still will do. Help me change through the forgiveness you offer. In Jesus' name I pray – Amen.”*

There, that's it. If you really believe what you just read God WILL forgive you! It's not hard, you just have to do it. That is how much God loves you – so much that He allowed His son to go to the cross and die in your place. That is how much God wants to spend eternity with you! Check out the bibliography in the back to see some resources on discipleship that will help you with your next steps if you've said this prayer.

### *We Forgive Others*

I really believe it is impossible to forgive others until you have experienced the forgiveness of God yourself. The reason is simple: How can one forgive if they've not experienced the power of forgiveness? The Bible tells us that we forgive others just as God has forgiven us. It's pretty clear that those who hold a grudge have not sought God's forgiveness, because their pain is still showing through their unforgiveness of others.

How much energy does it take to hold that grudge? How much time and emotion is wasted hating someone else, or plotting their demise like I used to? Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying your abusers aren't guilty and don't deserve your spite! I'm saying that unforgiveness is a prison you live in that does absolutely nothing to them – it only hurts you.

When we forgive someone what we're really doing is releasing their punishment from our hand to God's. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord – He repays people for their wrong doing, not us. In fact, which one of us really has the ability to repay an abuser in kind for their actions? No matter how many fantasies I had about hurting those who hurt me I never carried them out nor could I ever carry them out. Yet, when we forgive them the way God forgave us, we are saying that we are leaving all the justice stuff up to God, and we are moving on. That is true freedom!

Forgiving an abuser is a process not a one-time event. It is not letting them off the hook; and you still maintain safe boundaries with them if they are still in your life. Forgiving someone else is releasing yourself from their control of your life. Here is how you start.

1. Say in your heart and mind you truly forgive them for abusing you.
2. Pray that God gives you the strength and change of heart to truly forgive them.
3. Pray that God intervenes in their life to show them their error, so they recognized they were wrong.
4. Every time your abusers comes to mind, forgive them (i.e. repeat 1 and 2).
5. Realize that what happened to you sucks but does not define you unless you allow it.
6. Let go of the anger by forgiving the abuser for their evil.
7. Ask God to help you with your pain as you forgive.
8. Do all this until you truly feel a sense of freedom and forgiveness.



I have had to forgive a lot of people including my dad, foster parents, bullies (kids and adults), the system and more. Some were easier than others. Some went really quickly, others took years to get through. But each time I was able to forgive someone they no longer had any control over my emotions or memories. I can't explain it, but when we forgive as God has forgiven us, God also miraculously heals us.

Some years after I left foster care I ran into one of my old foster dads. His wife was one of the people who beat me. He didn't know it happened at the time – at least I didn't think he knew. I was really surprised when he apologized to me in that short meeting! He admitted that his wife had done the same thing to a second foster kid and that he had divorced her after learning about her anger issues. He was so sorry that I went through it – he and I reconciled and it was great! I was able to forgive him easily and am grateful I did.

I even reconciled with my dad if you can believe that. We had a long conversation over beers one night in a bar and during the conversation I was able to forgive him. Here's the interesting part: He never said he was sorry or apologized for anything he did or what he put us all through. Yet, I was still able to forgive him even though he didn't even ask for it! That was a good thing; he died a few years later, and I have no regrets about where our relationship ended.

Forgiving others is hard. We want so badly for them to pay for what they did. But you have to understand that the only person you're hurting by not forgiving someone is you. Now, you don't actually have to tell the other person you forgive them. If it's appropriate, great. But if it's not appropriate or it's unsafe to engage the person, just keep that forgiveness of them between you and God.

### *Asking Others to Forgive Us*

Show of hands, how many of you have screwed someone over? Okay, well maybe you didn't go that far, but have you ever hurt someone else in some way? I think we've all done that. Just as we forgive others we have to give others a chance to forgive us, and we have to take the initiative by asking for forgiveness. Yeah, this kind of sucks because you have to admit guilt and humble yourself, but it won't kill you and in fact will give you a HUGE sense of relief.

Let me say this right up front – not everyone you ask for forgiveness will give it. But know this, that is between them and God, not you and them. You do what God calls you to do: seek forgiveness for wrongs. Don't worry about the other person and their response.

When Jesus told me I had to ask forgiveness of the people I hurt I made a list – it was a about 10 people long. I had to apologize and seek forgiveness for things such as emotionally abusing them, my anger toward them, being sexual with them when I shouldn't have been, not thanking them when I should have, and hurting their feelings in a number of other ways. It was really hard to admit all this stuff about my actions, but after I did it – I wrote letters to everyone because not everyone would actually talk to me – I felt a massive sense of relief. I had done as Jesus asked and He rewarded me with freedom from the guilt of my past. I no longer felt guilty about what I had done; instead I felt regret for my decisions but I had a clean conscience because I had admitted my wrongs and sought to reconcile with those I wronged.

Of all those people, only one responded. I actually did those letters some 20 years ago and since then I've reconciled with another four of those people. God is good! I still pray for all the people I hurt that God will take away their pain and for those who may not have forgiven me yet that they find forgiveness so they can be released from that prison.

Do you have a list of people that you did wrong? Think you're in a place where you can ask them to forgive you for hurting them? Yes, it's hard, but if you want true healing you must heal the wounds you inflicted on others not just the ones that were inflicted on you.

### *Forgiving Ourselves*

If I had a dollar for every time someone told me, “I know God forgives me but I just can’t forgive myself,” I could retire. For some reason, God’s forgiveness in people’s lives just doesn’t seem like enough! They really believe that they deserve the punishment for their actions and can’t forgive themselves. You’ll never find healing that way, my friends! You must forgive yourselves and that includes the very hard stuff that haunts you at night.

Let me get right to the point: I know a lot of people who have been abused wrongly think they were the cause of their own abuse and don’t forgive themselves because they think they are guilty. If you fall into that group, know two things: First, NOTHING you did justifies the abuse you suffered – EVER! Second, God wants you to forgive yourself so that He can do wonderful things in your life.

There was a woman who gave me the line about God forgiving her but she couldn’t forgive herself. I kind of hammered her, asking her if she thought she was bigger than God. You see, when you say you know the God of the universe forgives you but then say you can’t forgive yourself what you’re really saying is God’s forgiveness is not enough, that you are bigger than God and your opinion matters more than God’s opinion. I think you can see the problem with that.

Again, forgiveness is not letting yourself off the hook. I've forgiven myself for all the dumb stuff I did, but to this day I am suffering the consequences of my actions, and I know that when I meet Jesus and we go through my life to see how I did, there are going to be some ugly moments! Instead of being rewarded for doing good, Jesus is going to look me in the eye and say, "Tom, what were you thinking? I had so much to give you and you lost it!" Forgiving yourself is not letting yourself off the hook in anyway. It is honestly accepting God's forgiveness as good enough in your life so that you can regret your decisions, learn from you mistakes, live with the consequences of those mistakes, and drive on!

Think about it this way: How can God use you for good if you're stuck in unforgiveness? How can God move you to healing if you won't leave the pain and ugliness of unforgiveness? How can God fill your life with joy and peace and love if you are focused on hate and pain and revenge? The two are not compatible. You have to choose!

Personally, I chose forgiveness and it has healed my soul in so many ways. I am not angry at anyone anymore. I don't fantasize about hurting people anymore. I can actually deal with the people from my past with the appropriate boundaries. People from my past can actually deal with me with their appropriate boundaries! I am reconciled to God and others like never before. I don't take offense when people do dumb things that affect me because I can immediately forgive them. I don't hold grudges. In other words, no more Mr. Hyde!

I've given you the formula how to do it, but I can't explain to you how it works other than to say it's supernatural. It makes no sense, there is no good explanation. But I encourage you to try it and see what happens. The worst-case scenario is nothing happens so you risk nothing at all. But the best-case scenario is you get rid of a ton of pain in your life that is holding you back and that's worth the risk of forgiving!

### **Prayer**

Do you talk with God?

Like I shared, I talked with God A LOT but more to the point I talked *at* God a lot. I'm not so sure I listened to Him in all those "conversations" I had with Him.

Prayer is just talking with God and listening to what He has to say. It's not some big ritual with special words or certain ways to say things. It's just talking. You can do it out loud, in your head, whisper or whatever. God hears you!

Here's a confession: I never went to therapy! When my mom died during my junior year in college, I was crushed when I got back to school. My girlfriend convinced me that I needed to see someone so I made an appointment at the school's counseling center. There was a three-month wait list to get in, but they did an initial assessment. They called about two hours after I did the assessment and wanted me to come in immediately. NO CHANCE! I was convinced they were going to lock me up! They probably should have – I was a mess.

Years later, after my Army barracks encounter with Jesus, I decided to go to a therapist: Jesus Himself.

I got the coolest job – I was the site security supervisor at a sawmill. My job was to walk around this giant mill punching a time clock to show that I was hitting all the right spots to make sure there wasn't a fire or something like that. Basically, I walked about 13 miles each night between 5 p.m. and 1 a.m. talking to Jesus.

We talked about EVERYTHING – my anger, my pain, my abuse, my abusers, my mom, my ex-girlfriend, my loneliness, my new girlfriend, my family, my foster families, my crazy life views, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Hulk in me, my self-medicating, my friends, college, my future, what He expected from me, what He would do for me, how He would heal me. Pretty much everything under the sun. I did this five days a week, eight hours a night for a year! That's roughly 10,400 hours of counseling!

Here is some of the stuff Jesus told me I had to do during our conversations:

## Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

- Stop making fear-based decisions
- Stop taking everything personally and getting mad all the time
- He would use everything for good IF I allowed Him to
- Do things His way, not mine
- Not everyone wants to hurt me
- Only He matters so stop worry about what other people think
- Forgive everyone – it's His job to judge them not mine
- You're okay
- I have plans for you
- Have healthier boundaries
- Follow the rules
- Submit to authority
- Stop taking offense at people
- Stop relying on alcohol
- Focus on what's important and don't get distracted



There was more, but you can see how when Jesus said these things they all make sense. But here was the cool part. I already knew I should do these things but I couldn't do them in my own strength. But because I was talking with Jesus, He partnered with me to help me do these things. In other words, it was His strength that allowed me to step out in faith and work on these things. And, you can see how risky some of these things would be in terms of the risk-gain quotient. But slowly over that year and beyond I did, indeed, work on all these things and more. I'm not going to lie and tell you that I was perfect, it was instantaneous, or that it was easy. None of that was true. It was five steps forward, two steps back, three steps forward, five steps back, 10 steps forward and so on. But I made progress and the more progress I made the stronger I got. And the stronger I got, the more progress I made.

Today, I talk with Jesus almost constantly. He's always in my head – I've kind of created the habit of talking with Him all the time. And why not? He's never steered me wrong, has always given me great advice, wants what is absolutely best for me, and healed me by walking me through how to change my views on my past, my present, people and more. Let me share where my life is today. As I do this, remember how I described myself to you at my worst:

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- I no longer have suicidal or homicidal ideation
- While I still have some irritation, I don't get angry or rage like the old days
- I am still a bit hypervigilant but not crazy paranoid like the old days
- I don't berate, belittle or manipulate people anymore.
- I don't drink anymore (23 years and counting).
- My flashbacks don't affect me emotionally as they did.
- I rarely have violent nightmares anymore.
- I don't need to be in control all the time even though I still like to be.
- I can actually trust people
- I love people and have compassion and empathy for them.
- I give of myself sacrificially to help others at every turn.
- My wife and I give a substantial part of our income to those in need.
- I have significant self-control and discipline.
- I am comfortable with who God made me to be – no longer square peg round hole.
- I've forgiven everyone no matter what.
- I've done what I can to reconcile with everyone.
- I know I am completely forgiven and that God sees me as a saint and holy.
- I can function in society, crowds of people, and in groups even though it's still not my favorite thing.
- I'm content (that's a biggie!).

I am a walking miracle. What God has done for me in my life is nothing short of a miracle. If you can understand the Mr. Hyde in me then you know from the bullets I listed above just how remarkable that really is. And it happened because I believed Jesus. I believed in who He is, I believed in what He told me, and I believed that He not only could but would heal me. And that is what He did and is continuing to do.

I am a work in progress so I keep talking to my therapist. And Jesus keeps healing me at deeper and deeper levels. It's still not easy, but it is easier than when I started. I know what to expect – change! I used to fight change and now I am eager for Jesus to make it in my life. I embrace the things Jesus wants from me even when they are extremely hard because I know that both in the short-run and long-run it will be for my benefit.

Question: are you willing to talk with Jesus? Again, what are you willing to risk in order to gain healing? It's just talking so I think you should give it a try – you might just be surprised by what Jesus has to say back! Remember how I talked about counseling in the previous chapters? One of your options is Christian counseling. I wouldn't necessarily recommend pastoral counseling – I think we need something more professional given our lives. But there are professional Christian counseling centers with licensed practitioners that use the latest techniques but include the spiritual aspect. As you talk with Jesus, perhaps seeing such a counselor would help in the process. Just a thought.

### Transformation

This is probably the hardest part to write about because it makes no logical sense. In my own life, I can't tell you why I went from basically being crazy to the fairly well-adjusted and successful person I am today other than to say, I allowed God to transform me. Notice what I said there? I allowed it. God didn't just do it. Remember that free will thing I told you about earlier? Because we have free will we have to allow God to transform and change us. And this is where most people fail and never get healing.

I can tell you story after story from people who tell me that they *do* pray, and they *do* believe, and they *do* forgive; yet God isn't healing them! They still are stuck in their pain. Honestly, I see it all the time in the church, in homeless shelters, at work – everywhere. Good-hearted people who really want healing suffer because they can't take this next step – they can't truly allow God to transform their lives.

Here's what I see instead: People crying out to God for healing but instead of being all in they keep one foot firmly planted in their dysfunction. They cry out to God for help but are still self-medicating. They cry out to God for help but they're still finding their self-worth in sexual relationships. They cry out to God for help but they hang on to their anger so they can protect themselves. They cry out to God for help but are unwilling to let go of their defense mechanisms. I know because it's *exactly* what I did for decades!

Friends, it just doesn't work that way. Transformation is not plastic surgery – a nip here, a tuck there. It is a complete makeover! EVERYTHING is on the table or it doesn't happen. Honestly, most people are not willing to give God everything so they continue to suffer and wonder why God isn't working in their lives. The thing I love about God is He is so black and white – you're in or you're not. You're with Him or you're not. You surrender to Him or you don't. That is how it works.

I was in a group Bible study a while back and was talking about submitting to God on some things in my life and how hard it was. One of my friends in the group absolutely pounced on me. She said, "Tom, it's not about submitting, it's about surrendering!" She was right. When we submit we're staying in control; we're deciding what we submit, and how we submit. When you surrender, however, you don't make the terms, and you don't decide how much. Surrender is giving total control to the victor! I needed to surrender and stop wrestling with God about control.

Transformation is about surrender not submitting. And that's what makes it hard. People don't like to surrender to God, because they no longer are in control and they have no idea what God is going to do to them. Instead they complain that God's not doing what they want Him to do. He's not healing them. He's not changing them. He's not punishing the wrong doers. They shift the focus from themselves to God as if God is the one who is wrong. Sure, it's human nature but it's also stupid.

I'm going to make a very bold statement: Only those with a broken soul want God to transform them. If you don't know the pain of a broken soul then you feel as if you can manage your life on your own without God's help. But if you truly have a broken soul – when you come to that realization that you are completely destroyed – you then become eager for God's transforming hand in your life. While I don't wish a broken soul on anyone, if you have one I hope that you are at a place where you realize your need for transformation.

What exactly is transformation and what, exactly, gets transformed?

Think about it this way: The God of the universe knew from the beginning of time that He was going to make you. He had a very specific plan in mind for you – you're not an accident! But when you got here you came into a world that is fallen due to all the sin and rebellion and you, too, were sinful and rebellious. On top of that, you were damaged by the abuse you suffered so you're a mess and not even close to the person God wants you to be.

However, God is God! His plan is never foiled. He can still make you into the person He created you to be! You can still enact the very specific plan God created you to do! All you have to do is let the maker remake you by surrendering your will to His.

Now, that sounds really “churchy.” What do I mean by surrendering your will to His? It’s actually pretty simple: The Bible tells us how we are to think, act, speak, pray, and live. We want to live differently than what the Bible says. Thus, to surrender your will to God’s means you stop doing the things you want to do and do the things God tells us to do in scripture.

Here are a couple examples from my own life.

I grew up in an environment where swearing was part of the everyday language. So, I naturally picked up that lingo and cussed from a very early age. Then I joined the Army where every other word pretty much is the F-bomb. I was very comfortable with that language because it was what I had always known. And when you swear, you also tell dirty jokes and jokes with sexual innuendo. It’s just the culture of it. However, scripture says clearly not to use coarse language or use inappropriate speech. This was *really* hard for me to change. I spent 40 years using this language and then I realized that God wanted better from me. I had to submit my will of using that language to His will to not use it. I’ve done a pretty good job honestly, but still have weak moments – usually when I’m frustrated or when I get around military veterans. But I work diligently not to swear and I rarely if ever tell a dirty joke anymore.

Another area in which I submitted my will to God's was caring about people. Honestly, in the old days I had so little trust and so much disdain for people I really didn't care much about anyone I didn't know personally. Yet, scripture tells us that we are to love each other. Blah! I couldn't even describe what love was more or less feel that way about another person. However, right there in black and white Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God and love each other. Loving God was easier for me than loving people probably because God's not actually sitting in front of you and God isn't a jerk like a lot of people you meet. However, I had to change if I really wanted to be healed. You see in my case not loving people meant that I couldn't be healed in the areas of forgiveness, homicidal ideation, and anger. If you don't love people you don't have to forgive them and you can act out against them. However, if you love them you have to actually care about them and do for them what is in their best interests including forgiving them. So, Jesus taught me how to have love for people – unconditional love. This was a supernatural thing because while I told Jesus I would surrender in this area I had no idea how to do it. Instead, He just did it, changing my heart and view of people. I started to see people like Jesus saw them instead of through my own damaged prism. Remarkable transformation occurred and today people from the old days would not recognize me. And that's kind of the point, isn't it?



These are just two examples where I surrendered my will to Jesus' will in my life. The results have been remarkable. But, as I've said, you have to allow it to happen. Jesus doesn't just come into your life and bulldoze you. It's your choice to surrender yourself to His way of doing things.

If you really want healing, though, you have to take that foot you have planted in your various dysfunction and surrender it all to Jesus. You must ask Jesus to transform you into the person God created you to be. You must have the courage to become a new creation in Christ as the Bible says. You must trust Jesus enough to know that out of your surrender will come this incredibly awesome person – one that is you but isn't you if you know what I mean!

Transformation isn't a one-time event. It's an ongoing remodeling! God transformed my life that day in the barracks. He continued to transform me as I walked around that sawmill every night. But there was one moment of transformation that fundamentally changed my life.

I had been out of the church for about 25 years. Growing up in all those different denominations had really turned me off to organized religion. I continued to be a "Christian" and speak with Jesus, but church wasn't for me. However, God called me back to church and because I was doing all I could to surrender to Him; we found a local church and began attending.

God also had called me to learn more about Him. I'm one of those guys who can study on his own, but if it's serious I need a class. I enrolled at Liberty University's seminary and began a Master's of Divinity program. At the same time, the church asked if I would serve as a worship leader. I agreed but felt really hinky about it. I'd stand in the pulpit in front of all these nice people and think, "If they actually knew anything about me, they'd throw me out of this place!"

One Sunday I was reading a verse about King David from the Bible. King David is considered one of the heroes of the Bible, yet he was a pretty bad guy at times. He had one of his best friends killed so he could steal his wife who he had already had an affair with and impregnated. He rebelled against God a couple other times. He just was impulsive, violent and troubled. Yet, God called him "a man after His own heart." As I was reading this it struck me: "If David can be a man after God's own heart with all the stuff he's done, so can I!"

I know, not rocket science, but the idea fundamentally transformed me! I finally understood what forgiveness looked like. See, David always sought forgiveness from God when he screwed up, which is why God said David was a man after His own heart. David always stayed in relationship with God and knew his place with God. Well, I did, too! I am a man after God's own heart as well! And that means God can transform me even more! This is when I started to love others like I never had. This is when I started to not take offense and forgive like never before. This is when God got ahold of my heart and just wrecked me! It was awesome!

I tell you this little story to show you that God can do amazing things with a contrite heart, a humble attitude, and a willingness to be the person He created you to be. And all you have to do is ask God to give you the ability to move that foot out of the dysfunction and towards Him. He will actually do the rest!

Again, I tell you most fail at this because they just don't want to give that kind of control of their lives to God. They don't trust Him, don't understand Him, and don't really want healing if we're honest. They'd rather wallow in their misery, play the victim, and blame everyone and God for their troubles. They don't want to change so, they won't.

Where are you? Do you want to continue to manage your crap and see how far that brings you or are you in a place where you truly understand that your soul is broken and you need the kind of healing that only Jesus can do? It's your choice!

### **Spiritual Warfare**

Show of hands, how many of you know about demons in your life? I used that phrase a lot but didn't mean it literally until I really understood that *there really are demons* out there pestering us in our weakest spots! Let me see if this will make sense to you: If there is a God of the universe and He says there was a fallen angel by the name of Lucifer who rebelled against God in heaven and was banished with a third of all the angels that supported him could you believe it? If you believe in God, you certainly can believe His telling of heavenly events are true.

So, if Lucifer, or as we call him Satan, did fall with a third of the other angels, where are they and what are they doing?

The Bible tells us that Satan is the prince of this world – in other words, he's here. His job? Keep man from having a relationship with God. How does He do it? Lots of ways. Here are just a few:

- Makes man believe there is no God
- Makes man believe God is unreasonable or hateful or evil or not good
- Convinced man that the Bible isn't really God's word
- Makes man believe God's ways and rules are outdated, old-fashioned, culturally insensitive, and unreasonable
- Makes man desire worldly things instead of heavenly things
- Makes man prioritize other things before God
- Makes man worship things other than God
- Makes man reject Jesus divinity
- Convinces man God doesn't love him
- Convinces man he is unlovable
- Attacks man's vulnerabilities
- Encourages man to do evil to one another
- Encourages man to rebel against God

If you were to take a pen and paper and write down your vulnerabilities what would they be?

Think about that for a moment.

Now, think about where your demons attack you. Are they the same places? Mine are! And these aren't just pretend demons. These are the fallen angels of Satan doing everything they can to keep you from getting the healing Jesus offers you. In the list above do this: Everywhere you see the word "man" put your name. See what's going on here?

Satan is not to be feared, at least not to be feared if you belong to Jesus. But he is to be respected – he can really screw with you if you're not strong in your faith. My demons still try to attack me but the Bible tells me that I can tell them to leave because I belong to Jesus and that's exactly what I do. But that doesn't mean they stop coming! I just always have to be ready for them.

And that is part of the transformation! Before we are transformed we either just do what our demons say to do (drink, rage, control, hurt, be violent, manipulate, lie, cheat, steal) or we are worn down by them resulting in depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and more. After our transformation, we fight against our demons, tell them to buzz off, and bask in the fact that we are marked by God as belonging to Jesus. I much prefer the after-transformation life to the before life.

I'm not going to write a big dissertation on spiritual warfare – if you're interested in the topic I'll have a resource for you at the end of the book. But let me say this. The Bible tells us that our enemy is not flesh and blood (people) but instead our enemy is spiritual. Thus, the weapons we would usually use against an enemy of flesh and blood doesn't work. Instead, we have to use spiritual weapons which include:

- Love
- Mercy
- Forgiveness
- Grace
- Selflessness
- Sacrifice

I know that I sucked at using these weapons when I first started. My childhood experiences had so damaged me that I really did not have the capacity to do any of that stuff. But, once I accepted Jesus' help in my life, He transformed me in ways where I very much could wield these weapons with devastating affect against Satan. You can defeat your demons and live a life of love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. It's an amazing thing!

### Who You Really Are

I spoke earlier about allowing God to transform you into the person He created you to be. I haven't used much scripture in this section because I don't know how familiar you may be with it; so, I didn't want to confuse you by writing a bunch of Bible verses you may not know. But here it is important to show you what God says about you! The following is who God created you to be:

#### Who You Are in Christ

I am alive with Christ ([Ephesians 2:5](#)).

I am free from the law of sin and death ([Romans 8:2](#)).

I am far from oppression, and fear does not come near me ([Isaiah 54:14](#)).

I am born of God, and the evil one does not touch me ([1 John 5:18](#)).

I am holy and without blame before Him in love ([Ephesians 1:4](#); [1 Peter 1:16](#)).

I have the mind of Christ ([1 Corinthians 2:16](#); [Philippians 2:5](#)).

I have the peace of God that passes all understanding ([Philippians 4:7](#)).

I have the Greater One living in me; greater is He Who is in me than he who is in the world ([1 John 4:4](#)).

I have received the gift of righteousness and reign as a king in life by Jesus Christ ([Romans 5:17](#)).

I have put off the old man and have put on the new man, which is renewed in the knowledge after the image of Him Who created me ([Colossians 3:9-10](#)).

I have no lack for my God supplies all of my need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus ([Philippians 4:19](#)).

I can do all things through Christ Jesus ([Philippians 4:13](#)).

I show forth the praises of God Who has called me out of darkness into His marvelous light ([1 Peter 2:9](#)).

I am God's child for I am born again of the incorruptible seed of the Word of God, which lives and abides forever ([1 Peter 1:23](#)).

I am God's workmanship, created in Christ unto good works ([Ephesians 2:10](#)).

I am a new creature in Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)).

I am a spirit being alive to God ([Romans 6:11](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:23](#)).

I am a believer, and the light of the Gospel shines in my mind ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#)).

I am a doer of the Word and blessed in my actions ([James 1:22,25](#)).



I am a joint-heir with Christ ([Romans 8:17](#)).

I am more than a conqueror through Him Who loves me ([Romans 8:37](#)).

I am an overcomer by the blood of the Lamb and the word of my testimony ([Revelation 12:11](#)).

I am a partaker of His divine nature ([2 Peter 1:3-4](#)).

I am an ambassador for Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:20](#)).

I am part of a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people ([1 Peter 2:9](#)).

I am the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

I am the temple of the Holy Spirit; I am not my own ([1 Corinthians 6:19](#)).

I am the head and not the tail; I am above only and not beneath ([Deuteronomy 28:13](#)).

I am the light of the world ([Matthew 5:14](#)).

I am His elect, full of mercy, kindness, humility, and longsuffering ([Romans 8:33](#); [Colossians 3:12](#)).

I am forgiven of all my sins and washed in the Blood ([Ephesians 1:7](#)).

I am delivered from the power of darkness and translated into God's kingdom ([Colossians 1:13](#)).

I am redeemed from the curse of sin, sickness, and poverty ([Deuteronomy 28:15-68](#); [Galatians 3:13](#)).

I am healed by the stripes of Jesus ([Isaiah 53:5](#); [1 Peter 2:24](#)).

I am raised up with Christ and seated in heavenly places ([Ephesians 2:6](#); [Colossians 2:12](#)).

I am greatly loved by God ([Romans 1:7](#); [Ephesians 2:4](#); [Colossians 3:12](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:4](#)).

I am strengthened with all might according to His glorious power ([Colossians 1:11](#)).

I am submitted to God, and the devil flees from me because I resist him in the Name of Jesus ([James 4:7](#)).

For God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, love, and a sound mind ([2 Timothy 1:7](#)).

It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me ([Galatians 2:20](#))<sup>[22]</sup>

How powerful would you be if you really were all these things? Nothing could stand against you! And this, my fellow former foster kids, is what we get when we have faith, forgive, pray, allow Jesus to transform us, and fight our demons! We get to be the people God created us to be – people of faith and courage and power, and love, and safe, and provide for, and healthy, and firm, and strong, and forgiven, and righteous, and saved, and conqueror, and a light to the world, and holy, and a joint-heir with Jesus, and a new creation – truly a new person! Who doesn't want that when compared to what you are now?

### **What Does Healing Look Like?**

This is the last section of this chapter but a really important one. When you hear the word healing what do you think of? Well, if you're like most people you think about the absence of whatever was wrong with you! But that is not the totality of healing. In fact, God's spiritual healing comes in a variety of ways.

#### *Removal of Condition*

Yes, there are absolute miracles out there! Cancer disappears for no reason! One day you're an emotional wreck; then God intervenes and you're just fine as if you never had the issue! Today you're so angry you could chew nails, but you forgive and miraculously you no longer feel any anger at all! Yes, it can and does happen! I've experienced this kind of healing in my own life so I know it's true.

#### *Ability to Cope*

Another type of healing, however, is the ability to cope with your situation. I have extensive health issues. They can be debilitating, yet God gives me exactly what I need every day to keep driving on. He has healed me of any depression I might have had due to losing my physical abilities. He has healed me of any self-pity I may have had due to my condition. He has healed me of a quitter mindset when the pain gets too bad. He's healed me in my attitude not allowing it to sour when my health worsens! No, He didn't grow back the parts of my stomach that were removed several years ago, and He hasn't stopped the migraines from coming, and no, He didn't take away the arthritis that wracks my body. No miracles there, but He does an incredible miracle with me every day by allowing me the ability to rise and work for Him in spite of it all. I get "my daily bread" from Him, meaning every day I get exactly what I need from God to do the things I must do. Some days I don't get much more than that, but God has so transformed my thinking that it is more than enough!

### *Use for Good*

Sometimes our conditions are used for good. I never understood why my mom was stricken with MS and was bedridden for most my life. One day God gave me the answer. You see, my mom was everything to me. And as I went through what I was going through I used to think, "If mom can do what she's doing, I can get through this." I had a goal to get her out of the nursing homes and if I quit focusing on surviving my situation I'd never save her. God used my mom's condition to help me get through mine.

He used her brokenness to keep me focused on making it no matter how difficult the struggle. Today, I hope that I am an inspiration to others who see the struggles I have physically yet see me go 100 miles per hours with my hair on fire! I want people to say, "If Tom could do it, I certainly can!" I hope I can be a fraction of the inspiration to someone else that my mom was to me! Today, I mentor high school and college age kids. Many of them had a difficult upbringing as well. I pray that God shows them that if I could make it through what I experienced, they can too. If my life serves to help others, it's all been worth it.

Whether God heals you fully through a miraculous intervention, changes your mindset to allow you to cope with what's going on with you, or uses you powerfully to the benefit of someone else, healing is what He does!

When taken together, you perhaps can understand why I chose healing over management of my condition. I didn't want to live my former life anymore. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life just getting by, losing relationships, being completely alone, not being able to hold a job, being angry all the time, and basically being a miserable schmuck. Instead, I chose life!

I tell people that they, too, don't have to live like they are. God has so much more for you, but it's your choice. I know I keep harping on that but it's true. You have to decide to keep living like you are or take a chance and be healed.

There is a time and place for everything and now may not be the time for you to choose change. I get that. It took me years as well. But don't just throw this idea out the window because you don't like the idea of God or you are afraid of what that change will bring or you think this is too good to be true. There will come a day when you will break like I did and perhaps then you'll be ready to accept the healing that Jesus has to offer you!

For those of you who are ready to heal now, I ask you to say this prayer:

*"God, I'm ready! I give myself to you wholly so heal me from my pain. Heal me emotionally, heal me mentally, heal me physically, and heal me spiritually. Lord Jesus, I am yours – do with me what you will in your name! Amen!"*

### Chapter 10 - Connecting the Dots

Whew, we've done a lot of work. Let me recap what we'd discussed so far:

- Childhood abuse and neglect will affect your childhood development and affect you for the rest of your life.
- Abandonment also seriously affects your childhood development and adult functioning
- Abuse/neglect could create emotional and mental health conditions (anxiety, depression, PTSD).
- Sometimes the abused become the abuser.
- Multiple foster care placements exacerbate abandonment issues.
- Former foster kids struggle when they age out with a variety of life issues (homelessness, unemployment, lack of opportunity, no safety net, suicidal ideation).
- Former foster kids struggle with college and work.
- Former foster kids struggle with relationships and intimacy.
- Former foster kids can make really bad decisions based on their dysfunctional upbringing.

- Former foster kids will be “triggered” by normal every day events.
- Former foster kids may try to self-medicate to ease their emotional pain.
- There is a difference between managing your condition and healing your condition.
- Healing is faith-based while management is counseling based.
- You have to choose how you want to live.

Now, what do we do with all this information? Well, I can only speak from my own personal experience and the experiences of those I have helped walk through this process. It has been a real blessing that others have allowed me deep into their lives to help them with their pasts. I have provided pastoral counseling (oh, I forgot to tell you that I’m also an ordained minister) to people who have been sexually abused, people who have had Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA), people who have PTSD from both childhood trauma, military combat and military sexual trauma, people who have struggled with addictions, and more. Let me share how to connect all these dots we’ve been discussing.

When you first go to counseling, the counselor will ask you a lot of questions about your past in order to assess exactly what they are dealing with. See, you may go in and tell them that you’re struggling with some issue, but most of the time the issues you struggle with are not the cause of your problems but are a symptom of something much deeper. Counseling is about getting to the deeper issues – the causes – and working to heal those so that the symptoms dissipate.



The counseling I do is faith-based, so I do the same thing and even use many of the same methods. The difference is I believe that God and His Holy Spirit can heal you and that drives the conversation instead of just providing various management and corrective thinking tools. So you know, I'm a big believer in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Motivational Interviewing, a newer therapy for PTSD called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing or EMDR, and other proven trauma-specific techniques. However, without adding the Holy Spirit to this mix you get results without God and as we discussed, I believe strongly that only God can actually heal your broken soul which means use the proven techniques but keep God in the driver's seat! Let me show you how this would work with a fictitious case. Perhaps you will see how you could apply this to yourself based on this example. Just a warning – I don't want to trigger anyone by this example so if it gets hard to read because it's too real, just put the book down and go get some fresh air. You don't actually have to read this part unless you want to see how I would go about taking the things we've discussed to their healing conclusion.

### **Subject: 27-year-old female**

Subject seeks counseling for depression, anxiety with panic attacks, and other emotional instabilities she would like to be able to control. Subject reports that her emotional mood swings are causing disruptions with work and relationships.

Given the above description, I would start pretty much like anyone else. “Tell me about your childhood and family.” While she spoke, I would be looking for overt or subliminal clues that might help identify the causation of her emotional symptoms. I would let her tell her story without interruption, watching for clues from her body language, voice intonation, and eye contact as well.

When there has been childhood abuse and neglect, the subject does not always readily admit these facts within their childhood narrative. Let’s say the subject in our example says she was in foster care but didn’t go into the reasons why. When she finishes her story, I will ask her if it is okay if I ask a couple hard questions. I’ve never had anyone tell me no! Here are my questions:

- 1. How did you end up in foster care?
- 2. Were you abused and/or neglected by your family or in foster care?
- 3. Was that abuse emotional, physical and/or sexual in nature?
- 4. How many foster homes were you in and how old were you in these homes?
- 5. Did you have siblings that also were separated from you?

You can see from these five questions how they play into me learning a lot about the subject based on what we’ve discussed in the first few chapters of this book! Let’s make up some answers for her.

1. She ended up in foster care when state child protective services (CPS) removed her from her home, because she was being abused physically by her father.
2. That answers part of question 2, but I'd pry about her safety in foster care. Yes, she also admits to being abused in foster care.
3. The abuse at home was physical – the abuse in foster care was sexual.
4. She was in three different foster homes during 18 months when she was 13-14 years old.
5. She had a younger sister that was with her in one home but not the other two.

From this, there are a few follow up questions to ask:

1. Were you abused in all three foster homes?
2. Was your sister with you in the abusive homes?
3. Was your sister abused, too?
4. Did you tell anyone?

The answer may go like this:

1. No, just one of the three homes by the son in the family.
2. To her knowledge her sister was not abused but was in the same home so perhaps. She doesn't like to think about it.
3. Yes, she told a teacher once the teacher figured out something was wrong.

Okay, there's a ton of information here to work with. First, we know why she is having issues with depression, anxiety and other emotional conditions. In fact, we would suspect PTSD and would assess her for that condition. Second, we can understand that during her daily life she must get triggered but we have to explore those trigger events a bit to determine what they are. Third, sexual abuse triggers significant shame, guilt, anger and other issues that will need to be addressed as well.

Based on the PTSD assessment, the subject self-identifies these conditions confirming the possible diagnosis:

- Trust issues
- Hypervigilance
- Intrusive memories and flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Emotional numbing
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Poor self-image/self-esteem
- Physical issues (gastric)

What I tell anyone I counsel is this: It *always* gets worse before it gets better. I want to be up front, because counseling is a place where you open up all those boxes that you've been trying so desperately to keep closed and when they open, boy, do they open! You will feel a bit out of control, but through the counseling process you will deal with each box and its contents so that when you are finished you actually don't need those boxes anymore at all!

I always start with triggers and here's why: I want to give immediate tools to someone who is struggling so that when they leave that very first meeting they have weapons at their disposal to help get their life under control. Based on what our subject has told us so far, here is where I would go next.

Here are some of the potential triggers I would explore with her:

- Aggressive men
- Angry men
- Violent men
- Loud or yelling men
- Drunk men
- Passive women
- Physicality of any sort
- Closed spaces (elevators, stairwells, work closets)
- Being alone with a man
- Fear of being abandoned
- Fear of losing friends
- Being used by people
- Being disrespected

While this is not quite as hit and miss as throwing spaghetti on the wall and hoping some sticks, it is a give and take process where you probe the subject to see if they feel as if these types of situations and scenarios elicit a trigger response. That response can be anger, fear, panic, emotional numbing, crying, shutting down, isolating, thoughts of self-harm, or any number of emotional responses. Remember that triggers exercise I provided in Chapter 1? That is basically what we're going to do with the subject first. We're going to identify triggers, figure out how those triggers habitually make the subject respond, and then decide how the subject would rather respond to those triggers and replace that action with her current reaction.

Obviously, we're going to work hard to get to a place where those triggers no longer exist, but that is a process and sometimes a long process. I always feel it is best to give hope to someone right away instead of telling them that within several weeks to months we'll get these triggers under control but in the meantime suck it up. The trigger exercise is important because it gives the subject control over them. She gets to decide how she would rather respond and she gets to then act on that decision, giving her complete control over the event. Thus, instead of the trigger controlling her, she now gets to work at controlling the trigger. It seems as if that would be a small deal but it's actually a big deal. Empowerment over your condition gives you so much hope that you can get stronger and better and even heal.

Let's say we've identified her triggers, prioritized them in the order on which she will work on replacing her reaction with an action, and she begins that process. Now what? Now we begin to dig deep and rebuild her damaged childhood development.

As we've discussed, when you are abused and/or neglected your childhood behavioral development gets perverted. This results in faulty thinking, wrong self-images and worldviews, and a warped sense of reality. Here is where you delve into the hard work of talking about ugly things and helping the subject see truth through God's eyes.

Let me stop here for a second and tell you how important building trust is in this process. I know I personally didn't trust very many people with the ugliness from my past. In fact, I really only trusted one person with it post-foster care until I found my own healing. Talking with a counseling is SUPER difficult, especially when they start asking very probing and uncomfortable questions about things you really don't want to remember more or less talk about. So, when you seek counseling – and you should – pick someone with whom you can build rapport, have trust, and feel comfortable sharing your most intimate thoughts. If you don't put it all out there for them, they can't help you. Okay, back to our scenario.

At this point I would ask the subject to go into detail about her family, their personalities, their histories, homelife, and the specifics about the abuse by her father and what her mother knew and did about the situation. I'd also want to know what age she was when it started, how long it lasted before it was reported, how it got reported, and when and how CPS intervened. This will be very hard for the subject to recall and narrate so you have to be very patient as they actually relive this from their past.



Once they finish their story, you have to come up with a plan with the subject. I think this is important. While I do what is called “directive” counseling, I do believe that the subject has to be enfranchised completely in the process – they have to own it or it won’t take. Let me explain directive counseling for a moment. In most counseling settings, the idea is to guide the subject to explore their issues so that they come up with their own solution. That’s great, but I’ve seen people in counseling for literally decades who just can’t seem to figure it out! I prefer directive counseling which does more than guide the person to their own conclusions. What it does is offer a variety of directive options that I see as a third-party, but the subject can’t necessarily see because they are too deep in their own forest. By providing this directive clarity, the subject can get to resolution much more quickly and efficiently. I also believe that if someone could fix their own problem they would – they wouldn’t need the help of someone else. They’ve come to counseling for, well, counsel! So, I give it. Okay, back to the scenario again!

We learn through her story that dad always yelled and spank the kids. He was more violent when he drank and even physically abused her mother as well. The dad never abused the little sister because she was his favorite. Mom never intervened on the subject's behalf because she was fearful for herself as well. But mom also wouldn't leave the abuser, because she loved him. The subject was physically abused with slapping, hair pulling, yelling, belittling, name-calling, and excessive punishments (groundings for the slightest infraction) from the time she was 5-years-old. Her sister was born five years after her so there is a connection between the new baby and dad's abuse of her. She reported her dad to a teacher at school when she was 13 after a particularly bad situation when dad came home drunk and beat the wife and her. The police arrested the dad for domestic violence and child abuse; the kids were removed from the home because mom did not intervene to protect the children and the state's CPS thought she was an enabler; and for the next 18 months, the two children were in three different homes (one together, two apart) while mom jumped through the hoops of the child welfare system to get the kids back. Dad plead guilty and did two years in prison; mom divorced dad while he was in jail. The two girls moved back in with their mom after foster care and lived safely thereafter. The subject has not spoken to or seen her father since she reported him.

From that scenario let me tell you the issues I see that we would perhaps work on in no particular order:

- Anger and forgiveness of dad.
- Anger and forgiveness of mom for not intervening and protecting her.
- Any bitter feelings toward sister.
- Subject's self-esteem issues – seeing herself as God sees her, not as her dad labeled her.
- Anger and forgiveness with the child welfare system.
- Any abandonment issues.
- All the PTSD issues.
- Guilt that she reported dad, and he went to jail because of her.
- Reconciliation with family members as appropriate.

But as we know from the scenario, that's not all – she was abused in foster care so we'd have to delve into that as well. Again, I would ask the subject to tell me as much as she can remember about the sexual abuse. Here's what we learn.

She and her sister were brought to their first foster home which had a mom, a dad, two sons aged 16 and 14, and a daughter aged 9. At the time, the subject was 13 and her sister was 8. Almost immediately upon arriving, the 16-year-old boy began being friendly but in a creepy way. One night about two weeks into their stay, the older son was asked to babysit all the other kids while the parents went out for dinner. While the other kids were in the bonus room watching a movie, the oldest son asked the subject to come talk with him in his room.

When she got there, he shut and locked the door and raped her. He told her that if she told anyone he'd kill her and her little sister. The sexual abuse continued throughout her stay in this home. A teacher at her school noticed her demeanor had changed drastically since being removed from her biological parents and one day asked her if everything was okay. The subject broke down crying and confessed to what was happening. The school called the child welfare people who immediately removed she and her sister but were unable to place them together in short-term care until they could find a longer placement for them both, which they eventually did. The subject never knew what happened to the boy or if he had sexually assaulted her sister or his own sister. Nothing more was ever said of it by the state. She was expected to just move on.

As her story unfolds, you can see other issues that we need to address:

- Forgiveness of her sexual abuser.
- Forgiveness of the foster family that put her in harm's way.
- Forgiveness of the system that did not give her proper help after the abuse.
- Anger at the entire situation.
- Fear of being attacked sexually and otherwise.

- Issues with personal intimacy.
- Identify triggers from the on-going sexual abuse.
  - Flashbacks/intrusive memories/nightmares
  - Smells
  - Closed rooms
  - Physical touch
  - Being grabbed
  - Being held down
  - Shame/guilt
  - Self-worth/self-esteem
  - Trust issues
  - Fear from threats
  - Anger at parents for putting her in this situation in the first place

As you can see, there is a deep, dark hole here that is interconnected with her entire experience. After hearing these stories, I would ask her to tell me about what her life is like today as a 27-year-old woman. I'd ask her to share with me from the time she went back home to live with mom (subject said the other two foster homes were fine) to present time. Here is what she tells us.

When she and her sister were reunited with their mom it was great, but you could tell the relationship had changed. While mom knew that dad had done wrong, it was like she chose him over us, and the subject was to blame for the family being split up. There was clearly a bitterness there from mom to the subject, which resulted in a lot of tension in the house. But she and her sister reconnected well and are very close to this day.

As soon as the subject turned 18 years old and graduated high school she left the house. Tension had gotten to stressful. Mom didn't understand or care about the subject's abuse and trauma and told her to just get over it. Subject got a job and put herself through community college where she studied to be an administrative assistant, which is what she does today for a private company.

The subject reports that she does not have very many close friends and no real male friends. She likes to be alone and enjoys drawing, painting, and doing other art projects in her free time. She and her mother talk about once a month, and again, she has not had any contact with her father since she was 13 years old. She says that she gets along pretty well, but gets irritated and angry easily over silly things. That she never really feels safe. She doesn't trust anyone, especially men who are only after "one thing." She's had a couple boyfriends but it didn't work out as thing progressed and they pushed sexually. She does get anxiety and panics when she walks into a room and the door closes – she needs to know there is an exit readily available or she loses it. She also is depressed, feels as if nobody really understands or loves her. She feels she is blamed for everything and nobody respects her opinion. She has suicidal ideation and has in the past cut herself and done other self-harm things such as take too many sleeping pills. She claims she wasn't trying to kill herself but was not even convincing to herself. She is lonely yet is uncomfortable with people. She is accomplished and well-liked by her co-workers, yet she sees herself as incompetent and unlikable.

The last area I would press into before rolling up our sleeves and digging in would be faith. I'd want to know if she was a person of faith – did she go to church, get baptized, go to youth group, and the rest. You may think because she's seeing a Christian counselor, this should be a given. But people often come to Christian counselors through recommendations of a friend and/or because it might be more affordable. So, it's important to know where she is at spiritually. Let's say she says this:

Subject reports that her dad was very religious but a complete hypocrite – people who follow Jesus don't beat their kids and wife. He would pretend to be all holy and righteous at church and then go out and get drunk and beat on them. Not exactly the model of Christianity. Mom was a believer as well, but never strong enough to do the right thing. Subject reports that her experience is people claim to be Christian, but it's all fake. In fact, the home where she was raped was supposedly a Christian family as well. Subject says she believes in Jesus but not the church or people who go to church – they're all liars. She hasn't been to church since leaving home – her mom would force she and her sister to go. She hasn't read the Bible or prayed since then either.

As a pastoral counselor who believes that only God can heal a broken person like this, the information she shares is invaluable. I need to find out some more, things such as:



- Where was your faith during your abuse? Did you believe in God then?
- Where do you think God was during your abuse?
- Are you mad at God?
- What is your relationship with Him now?

Okay, now we're ready to do some work! I know it seems like a lot but getting all the background is so important because there are so many details and connections that have to be voiced before you really can start to understand how it is all connected.

The process I use goes like this:

1. Address triggers and mitigate responses.
2. Assess and identify diagnosable conditions based on Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders -5 (DSM-5) and treat accordingly, including referring for professional help/medication.

3. Focus on forgiving abusers/enablers/system based on biblical precepts.
4. Work on correcting faulty thinking and worldview.
  1. Guilt/shame
  2. Bitterness
  3. Victimization
  4. Generalizations
    1. Men
    2. Trust
    3. Sex
    4. Physicality
    5. Closed rooms and safety
    6. Christianity
5. Rebuild self-esteem and self-worth based on how God sees subject
6. Rebuild subject's faith to enable Holy Spirit healing
7. Work with subject to embrace their identity in Jesus as opposed to their identity in the world
8. Work toward reconciliation where appropriate and safe
9. Slowly plug subject back into social settings that work toward her strengths, such as art classes
10. Maintenance – follow up conversations as needed to maintain gains

I know, it's really not rocket science! But it is complex, painful, interconnected, and honestly exhausting to go through this process. Yet, the gains you make become so obvious that you find it worth all the struggle relatively quickly. Imagine if we could take this 27-year-old woman and free her from the demons of her past abuse! Imagine the life she could live! Instead of being oppressed with depression, anxiety with panic attacks, and PTSD, she could live a life of freedom where even if she were triggered she could quickly get it under control instead of having it control her! I've had that transformation in my life, and I tell you it was worth all the pain I experienced and tears I shed working my way to it.

### Conclusion

As I think about it, I don't know if I would have read a book like this at the height of my struggles or not. I suppose it would have depended on how I got my hands on it. Had it been given to me by someone I probably would have resisted. However, if I privately ran across it in a bookstore, I probably would have secretly bought it and read it.

Would I have believed it? That is a great question. I am sure I would have seen me in it's pages but the question is would I have been able to be honest enough with myself to admit that I had a problem and that there was something I could do about it. At my worst, I was convinced it was everyone else who had a problem and not me. So, this book would have been hard to accept even though it clearly would ring true as I read each section.

I guess it would have come down to this for me: How much did I have to lose if I didn't accept it and how much did I have to gain if I did accept it? I may have been emotionally damaged but I wasn't stupid. If I would have been able to figure out that I had a ton to lose in life by not getting help and even more to gain if I did, chances are I'd make the investment to realize the gains even if it would be extremely hard to do.

Now I'm thinking about you.

I know that one size doesn't fit all and some of the things I've written may not apply to you. But I know that if you've gone through foster care – if you've been abused at all – even if you've just experienced a little life – there is something in this book for you. Here is what I always tell people: Take the good and throw out the bad. Use the stuff that applies and don't worry about the stuff that doesn't. That way you always get something out of everything you read, examine and study.

Here is something I know for certain: Just because life gave you a crap sandwich doesn't mean you have to spend the rest of your life eating it! I chewed on my own crap sandwich for years before I realized that I didn't have to live that way. Until that awakening, I never really knew there was another way to live! But there is. And if you've survived foster care I know you have it in you to go live that better life!

Yes, it's hard. I won't lie. You will have to sacrifice, have incredible discipline, change your thinking completely, seek help, allow others into your life, and become the person God created you to be instead of the broken person you are. But it is doable. I am living proof of that as are others I know who survived foster care and made something of their lives afterwards.

I don't think we can ever completely get away from our experiences. And I actually think that is a good thing. As former foster kids and survivors of abuse, neglect and abandonment, we have a special understanding that can help others where people who do not have the same experience can't. I think that is part of God's plan for our lives; we are to reach back to help those in ways we were never helped.

I hope that this book has given you hope. Perhaps now you understand what you're going through and why, as well as what you can do about it. You do not have to be a prisoner to your past! While this book is anything but comprehensive, I believe it does hit the high spots and commonalities we share as aged out survivors of the foster care system.

In the following pages are a bibliography of books and resources you may find helpful. There also is an appendix full of emotional and mental health surveys and indicators for your review and use.

I will continue to pray for you – and I hope you will for me – that we all get stronger each day and that the Lord heals us so that we can use our traumatic experiences for good and to help others.

May God bless and keep you, protect you from all harm, and heal you mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually so that you can live the life He has planned for you!

Rev. Tom Mann

June 2020

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# APPENDIX A

## General Assessment of Function

The Global Assessment of Functioning, or GAF, scale is used to rate how serious a [mental illness](#) may be. It measures how much a person's symptoms affect his or her day-to-day life on a scale of 0 to 100.

It's designed to help mental health providers understand how well the person can do everyday activities. The score can help figure out what level of care someone may need and how well certain treatments might work.

The GAF is based on a scale that was first used in 1962. It's been updated over time. In 2013, the manual that psychiatrists in the U.S. use to define and classify mental disorders dropped it in favor of a scale designed by the World Health Organization. But government agencies and insurance companies, as well as others, still use it and aren't expected to replace it any time soon.

## The Scale

A GAF rating can be based on many things, including:

- An interview or questionnaire
- Medical records
- Information from the person's doctor, care givers, or close relatives
- Police or court records about violent or illegal behavior

It's broken into 10 sections. These are known as anchor points. The higher your score, the better you're able to handle daily activities.<sup>[23]</sup>

You will need your healthcare provider to refer you to a specialist who can administer a GAF test and provide you an accurate score. However, below is the general breakdown from which you can see where you may be functioning.

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## The Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF)

Source: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition

- **100-91:** Superior functioning in a wide range of activities, life's problems never seem to get out of hand, is sought out by others because of his or her many positive qualities. No symptoms.
- **90-81:** Absent minimal symptoms (e.g. mild anxiety before an exam), good functioning in all areas, interested and involved in a wide range of activities, socially effective, generally satisfied with life, no more than everyday problems or concerns (e.g., an occasional argument with family members).
- **80-71:** If symptoms are present, they are transient and expectable reactions to psychosocial stressors (e.g., difficulty concentrating after family argument); no more than slight impairment in social, occupational, or school functioning (e.g., temporarily falling behind in school work).
- **70-61:** Some mild symptoms (e.g., depressed mood and mild insomnia) OR some difficulty in social, occupational, or school functioning (e.g., occasional truancy, or theft within the household), but generally functioning pretty well, has some meaningful interpersonal relationships.
- **60-51:** Moderate symptoms (e.g., flat and circumstantial speech, occasional panic attacks) OR moderate difficulty in social occupational, or social functioning (e.g., few friends, conflicts with co-workers).
- **50-41:** Serious symptoms (e.g., suicidal ideation, severe obsessional rituals, frequent shoplifting) OR any serious impairment in social, occupational, or school functioning (e.g., no friends, unable to keep a job).
- **40-31:** Some impairment in reality testing or communication (e.g., speech is at times illogical, obscure, or irrelevant) OR major impairment in several areas, such as work or school, family relations, judgment, thinking, or mood (e.g., depressed man avoids friends, neglects family, and is unable to work, child frequently beats up younger children, is defiant at home, and is failing at school).
- **30-21:** Behavior is considerably influenced by delusions or hallucinations OR serious impairment in communication or judgment (e.g., sometimes incoherent, acts grossly inappropriately, suicidal preoccupation) OR inability to function in almost all areas (e.g., stays in bed all day, no job, home, or friends).
- **20-11:** Some danger of hurting self or others (e.g., suicide attempts without clear expectation of death, frequently violent, manic excitement) OR occasionally fails to maintain minimal personal hygiene (e.g., smears feces) OR gross impairment in communication (e.g., largely incoherent or mute).
- **10-1:** Persistent danger of severely hurting self or others (e.g., recurrent violence) OR persistent inability to maintain minimal personal hygiene OR serious suicidal act with clear expectation of death.
- **0:** Inadequate Information.

## APPENDIX B

### **Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire**

Childhood experiences, both positive and negative, have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. As such, early experiences are an important public health issue. Much of the foundational research in this area has been referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Adverse Childhood Experiences have been linked to

- risky health behaviors,
- chronic health conditions,
- low life potential, and
- early death.

As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for these outcomes.<sup>[24]</sup>

The following page contains an ACE quiz to determine your ACE score on a ten-point scale. If you've lived through some of the situations in this book, don't be surprised by a high score: Mine is 9.

### **Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire**

#### **Finding your ACE Score**

## Life After Foster Care - A Survival Guide

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?

Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often push, grab, slap, or throw something at you or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?

Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way or try to or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you? Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

4. Did you often feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you often feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?

Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced? Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

7. Was your mother or stepmother often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her or sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard or ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?

Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs? Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?

Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_

10. Did a household member go to prison? Yes No If yes enter 1 \_\_\_\_\_



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Now add up your “Yes” answers: \_\_\_\_\_ This is your ACE Score [\[25\]](#)

## APPENDIX C

### Patient Health Questionnaire 9

The Patient Health Questionnaire 9 is a screening test for depression.

The following quiz will help you determine if you should see someone for depression.

#### Patient Health Questionnaire 9

Please score questions 1-9 on a four-point scale:

Not at All – Zero Points

Several Day – One Point

More than Half the Days – Two Points

Nearly Every Day – Three Points

Please score question 10 based on this scale:

Not at All – Zero Points

Somewhat Difficult – One Point

Very Difficult – Two Points

### Extremely Difficult – Three Points

During the past two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

- 1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things?
- 2. Feeling down, depressed, hopeless?
- 3. Troubling falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much?
- 4. Feeling tired or having little energy?
- 5. Poor appetite or overeating?
- 6. Feeling bad about yourself – you have let yourself or your family down?
- 7. Trouble concentrating on things such as reading a newspaper or watching television?
- 8. Moving or speaking so slowly that others could have noticed or so fidgety or restless that you have been moving a lot more than usual?
- 9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead; thought of hurting yourself in some way?
- 10. If any of these answers were score more than “none at all” how difficult have these problems made it for you to work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Now add up your score and see where you land in the scale provided.

### PHQ-9 Management Summary

<b>Score</b>	<b>Depression severity</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>0-4</b>	<b>Minimal or none</b>	<b>Monitor; may not require treatment</b>
<b>5-9</b>	<b>Mild</b>	<b>Use clinical judgment (symptom duration, functional impairment) to determine necessity of treatment</b>
<b>10-14</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	
<b>15-19</b>	<b>Moderately severe</b>	<b>Warrants active treatment with psychotherapy, medications, or combination</b>
<b>20-27</b>	<b>Severe</b>	

[26]

## APPENDIX D

### PTSD Check List – Civilian Version (PCL-C)

Below is a list of problems and complaints that people sometimes have in response to stressful life experiences. Please read each one carefully, pick the answer that indicates how much you have been bothered by that problem *in the last month*.

---

<b>No.</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Not at all (1)</b>	<b>A little bit (2)</b>	<b>Moderately (3)</b>	<b>Quite a bit (4)</b>	<b>Extremely (5)</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Repeated, disturbing memories, thoughts, or images of a stressful experience from the past?</b>					
<b>2.</b>	<b>Repeated, disturbing dreams of a stressful experience from the past?</b>					

---

---

**3. Suddenly *acting* or *feeling* as if a stressful experience were *happening* again (as if you were reliving it)?**

---

**4. Feeling *very upset* when *something* reminded you of a stressful experience from the past?**

- 
- 5. Having *physical reactions* (e.g., heart pounding, trouble breathing, or sweating) when *something reminded* you of a stressful experience from the past?**
- 
- 6. Avoid *thinking about* or *talking about* a stressful experience from the past or avoid *having feelings* related to it?**
- 
- 7. Avoid *activities* or *situations* because they *remind you* of a stressful experience from the past?**
- 
- 8. Trouble *remembering important parts* of a stressful experience from the past?**
- 
- 9. Loss of *interest in things that you used to enjoy*?**
- 
- 10. Feeling *distant* or *cut off* from other people?**
- 
- 11. Feeling *emotionally numb* or being unable to have loving feelings for those close to you?**
- 
- 12. Feeling as if your *future* will somehow be *cut short*?**

---

**13. Trouble *falling or staying asleep?***

---

**14. Feeling *irritable or having angry outbursts?***

---

**15. Having *difficulty concentrating?***

---

**16. Being *“super alert” or watchful on guard?***

---

**17. Feeling *jumpy or easily startled?***

### *How is the PCL Scored?*

Add up all items from each of the 17 items for a total severity score (range = 17-85)

**17-29** This cut off shows little to no severity.

**28-29** Some PTSD symptoms - If you are seeing or will be seeing a therapist, print the results of this Quiz and take to your therapist for further evaluation.

**30-44** Moderate to Moderately High severity of PTSD symptoms - If you are seeing or will be seeing a therapist, print the results of this Quiz and take to your therapist for further evaluation.



**45-85** High Severity of PTSD symptoms - If you are seeing or will be seeing a therapist, print the results of this Quiz and take to your therapist for further evaluation.<sup>[27]</sup>

## APPENDIX E

### What are suicidal thoughts?

13 Feb 2018

By Christian Nordqvist

Reviewed by [Timothy J. Legg, PhD, CRNP](#)

Suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation, means thinking about or planning suicide. Thoughts can range from a detailed plan to a fleeting consideration. It does not include the final act of suicide.

Suicidal thoughts are common, and [many people experience them](#) when they are undergoing [stress](#) or experiencing [depression](#). In most cases, these are temporary and can be treated, but in some cases, they place the individual at risk for attempting or completing suicide.

Most people who experience suicidal ideation do not carry it through, although some may make suicide attempts.

Anyone who has suicidal thoughts should ask for help. If a loved one is having these thoughts, measures should be taken to help and protect them.

See the last section of this article for information on how to get help for someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts.

### *Fast facts about suicide ideation*

- Most people who have suicidal thoughts do not carry them through to their conclusion.
- Causes of suicidal thoughts can include depression, [anxiety](#), eating disorders such as [anorexia](#), and substance abuse.
- People with a family history of mental illness are more likely to have suicidal thoughts.
- The confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached toll-free on **1-800-273-TALK(8255)**, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

### Symptoms

A person who is experiencing or could experience suicidal thoughts may show the [following signs](#) or symptoms:

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- feeling or appearing to feel trapped or hopeless
- feeling intolerable emotional pain
- having or appearing to have an abnormal preoccupation with violence, dying, or death
- having mood swings, either happy or sad
- talking about revenge, guilt, or shame
- being agitated, or in a heightened state of anxiety
- experiencing changes in personality, routine, or sleeping patterns
- consuming drugs or more alcohol than usual, or starting drinking when they had not previously done so
- engaging in risky behavior, such as driving carelessly or taking drugs
- getting their affairs in order and giving things away
- getting hold of a gun, medications, or substances that could end a life
- experiencing depression, [panic attacks](#), impaired concentration
- increased isolation
- talking about being a burden to others
- psychomotor agitation, such as pacing around a room, wringing one's hands, and removing items of clothing and putting them back on
- saying goodbye to others as if it were the last time
- seeming to be unable to experience pleasurable emotions from normally pleasurable life events such as eating, exercise, social interaction, or sex

- severe remorse and self-criticism
- talking about suicide or dying, expressing regret about being alive or ever having been born

A significant number of people with suicidal ideation keep their thoughts and feelings a secret and show no signs that anything is wrong.

### Causes

Suicidal ideation can occur when a person feels they are no longer able to cope with an overwhelming situation. This could stem from financial problems, death of a loved one, a broken relationship, or a devastating or debilitating illness.

The most common situations or life events that might cause suicidal thoughts are grief, sexual abuse, financial problems, remorse, rejection, a relationship breakup, and unemployment.

The following risk factors may have an impact on the probability of someone experiencing suicidal ideation:

- a family history of [mental health](#) issues
- a family history of substance abuse
- a family history of violence
- a family history of suicide
- a feeling of hopelessness
- a feeling of seclusion or loneliness
- being gay with no family or home support
- being in trouble with the law
- being under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- for children, having disciplinary, social or school problems
- having a problem with substance abuse
- having a psychiatric disorder or mental illness
- having attempted suicide before
- being prone to reckless or impulsive behavior
- possessing a gun
- [sleep deprivation](#)
- knowing, identifying, or being associated with someone who has committed suicide

*Conditions that are linked to a higher risk of suicidal ideation include:*

- adjustment disorder
- anorexia nervosa
- bipolar disorder
- body dysmorphic disorder
- borderline personality disorder
- dissociative identity disorder
- gender dysphoria, or gender identity disorder
- major depressive disorder
- panic disorder
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- schizophrenia
- social anxiety disorder
- generalized anxiety disorder
- substance abuse
- exposure to suicidal behavior in others

Genetic factors may increase the risk of suicidal ideation. Individuals with suicidal thoughts tend to have a family history of suicide or suicidal thoughts.

### Prevention

Family and friends may notice through a person's speech or behavior that they could be at risk.

They can help by talking to the person and by seeking appropriate support, for example, from a doctor.

The National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) suggests the following tips for helping someone who may be going through a crisis:

- **Asking them** if they are thinking about suicide. Studies show that asking does not increase the risk.
- **Keeping them safe** by staying around and removing means of committing suicide, such as knives, where possible
- **Listening to them** and being there for them
- **Encouraging them** to call a helpline or contacting someone the individual might turn to for support, for example, a friend, family member, or spiritual mentor
- **Following up with them** after the crisis has passed, as this appears to reduce the risk of a recurrence

Other tips include keeping some emergency phone numbers at hand, for example, a trusted friend, a helpline, and the person's doctor.

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### Treatment



Suicide ideation can be a symptom of a mental health problem, such as depression or bipolar disorder.

A significant number of mental health problems, including depression, can be successfully treated or managed with medications and talking therapies, such as [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (CBT) or counseling.

It is important to seek treatment if you or a loved one is experiencing mental health problems.

Once treatment starts, it is important to follow the treatment plan, attending follow-up appointments, taking medications as instructed, and so on.

### **Reducing the risk**

The following may help lower the risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts:

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- getting family support, for example, talking to them about how you feel and asking them to meet your health provider and possibly attend sessions with you
- avoiding alcohol and illegal drugs
- avoiding isolation and staying connected to the outside world, as much as possible
- doing exercise
- eating a well-balanced, healthful diet
- getting at least 7-8 hours continuous sleep in every 24-hour period
- removing any guns, knives, and dangerous drugs, for example, by giving them to a trusted friend to take care of
- seeking out things that give you pleasure, such as being with friends or family you like, and focusing on the good things you have
- attending a self-help or support group, where you can discuss issues with people who understand, get help from others, and help people with similar problems to get through their difficulties
- seeking and following treatment

Remember that many people experience suicidal thoughts at some time, and many of them find a solution, for example, by sharing their problem with someone.

It does not mean that there is anything wrong with you. Even if you feel alone in a place and afraid to share what you are going through, a confidential hotline may help.

## Resources

If you or a loved one are having thoughts of suicide, it is important to get help.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** Available for a confidential chat 24 hour a day, 7 days a week. Toll-free: 1-800-273-TALK(8255).

**Befrienders Worldwide:** Contact numbers and support information for your country in different countries and different languages.

**Childhelp:** **National Child Abuse Hotline** for the U.S. Call 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453). All calls are anonymous and confidential.

**Veterans crisis line:** Confidential support for veterans or those who are concerned about a veteran.

- Call: 1-800-273-8255 and press 1
- Text 838255

These services offer confidential help.<sup>[28]</sup>

## APPENDIX F

### The Michigan Alcohol Screening Test

For each question, please answer YES or NO

1. Do you feel you are a normal drinker – normal means you drink less than or as much as most other people?
2. Have you ever awakened in the morning after some drinking the night before and found that you could not remember part of the evening?
3. Does your wife, husband, a parent, or other near relative ever worry or complain about your drinking?
4. Can you stop drinking without a struggle after one or two drinks?
5. Do you ever feel guilty about your drinking?
6. Do friends or relatives think you are a normal drinker?
7. Are you able to stop drinking when you want to?
8. Have you ever attended a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous?
9. Have you gotten into physical fights when drinking?
10. Has your drinking ever created a problem with you and your wife, husband, a parent or other relative?
11. Has your wife, husband (or other family member) ever gone to anyone for help about your drinking?
12. Have you lost friends because of your drinking?
13. Have you ever gotten into trouble at work or school because of drinking?
14. Have you ever lost a job because of drinking?
15. Have you ever neglected your obligations, your family or your work for two or more days in a row because of your drinking?

16. Do you drink before noon fairly often?
17. Have you ever been told you have liver problems – Cirrhosis?
18. After heavy drinking have you ever had Delirium Tremens (D.T.s) or severe shaking, or heard voices or seen things that were not really there?
19. Have you ever gone to anyone for help about your drinking?
20. Have you ever been in the hospital because of your drinking?
21. Have you ever been a patient in a psychiatric hospital or on a psychiatric ward of a general hospital where drinking was part of the problem that resulted in the hospitalization?
22. Have you ever been seen in a psychiatric or mental health clinic, or gone to any doctor, social worker, or clergyman for help with an emotional problem where drinking was part of that problem?
23. Have you ever been arrested for drunk driving, driving while intoxicated or driving under the influence of intoxicants? If so, how many times?
24. Have you ever been arrested or taken into custody even for a few hours because of drunk behaviors? If so, how many times?

In scoring the MAST points are assigned to a response depending upon whether the item

is worded positively or negatively.

For items 1, 4, 6 and 7 negative answers are consistent with alcoholic responses.

For items 2, 3, 5, and 9-25 positive responses are consistent with alcoholic responses.

The scale assigns a 1-5 weighting to each of the items, with a rating of 5 being considered diagnostic of alcoholism. Questions that were highly discriminating were given a value of two points and others assigned a one-point value. An alcoholic response to questions 8, 19, or 20 is considered diagnostic and is assigned a value of five points. A total score is computed as a sum of item values as seen in the table below. Total scores range from 0 to 53.<sup>[29]</sup>

### **MAST Point System**

#### **Question Points Assigned**

1. (negative responses are alcoholic) 2
2. 2
3. 1

4. (negative responses are alcoholic) 2

5. 1

6. (negative responses are alcoholic) 2

7. (negative responses are alcoholic) 2

8. 5

9. 1

10. 2

11. 2

12. 2

13. 2

14. 2

15. 2

16. 1

17. 2

18. 2

19. 5

20. 5

21. 2

22. 2

23. 2

24. 2

## **APPENDIX G**

### **Resource List**

The following is a list of resources that may be helpful as you move forward in your post-foster care journey. This resource list does not include footnoted resources already contained in the body of this work.

**United States Department of Health and Human Administration for Children and Families Children’s Bureau Resources for Youth in Transition** – Multiple documents to help aging-out foster kids -

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/resources/>



**United States Department of Education Foster Care Transition Toolkit -**

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf>

**United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** – Housing for aged-out foster kids. [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/youth\\_foster\\_care.html](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/youth_foster_care.html)

**National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI)** – Their mission is to transform the child welfare system and vastly improve outcomes for foster youth by empowering the youth and their families, building a grassroots movement in 435 congressional districts across the country, and partnering with committed policymakers. Truly transformative foster care reform will not come to fruition until the individuals who have personally experienced the child welfare system have a strong voice in the policymaking process. And NFYI is dedicated to ensuring their place at the table. <https://www.nfyi.org/>

**The Annie E. Casey Foundation** – Advocates for at-risk youth, including foster children. <http://www.aecf.org/resources/helping-children-aging-out-of-foster-care-prepare-for-independence/>

**I'm Aging Out – A Foster Care Resource Guide** – Facebook Based

<https://www.facebook.com/ImAgingOut/>

**The National Foster Care Registry** – Facebook Based Ensuring youth aging out of the foster care system age out with safe, secure, stable housing, sustainable employment and a support team.

<https://www.facebook.com/nationalfostercareregistry>

**Aging Out Institute** - AOI promotes resources and strategies that help youth age out of foster care and into adulthood successfully. <http://www.agingoutinstitute.org/>

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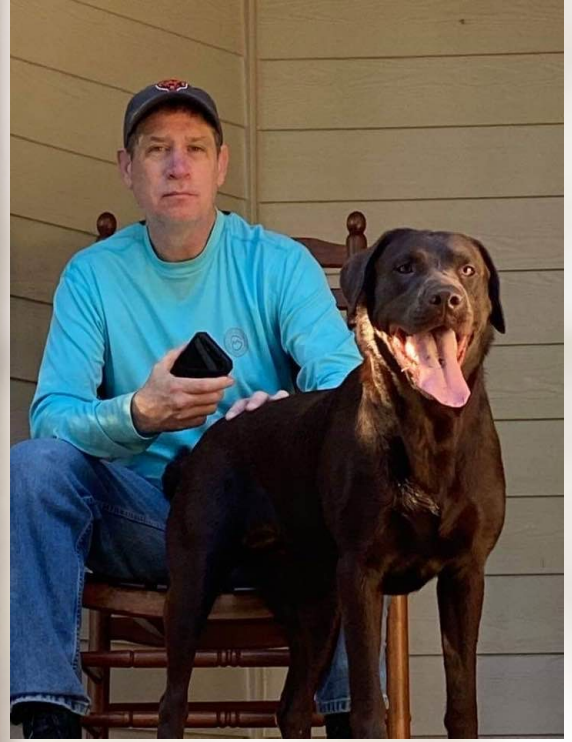
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# Life After Foster Care

## A Survivor's Guide



Having grown up in a dozen different homes, Tom Mann experienced all the things that go along with being a foster kid – physical and emotional abuse, neglect, homelessness, food insecurity, humiliation, and fear. As a 17-year-old emancipated minor Tom thought he'd survived the system! Unfortunately, he was wrong and the after effects of the system would develop into a nightmare of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, emotional pain, self-medicating, broken relationships, a string of jobs, and more. As a 55-year-old man, Tom is finally ready to share with you what he had to learn the hard way. Nobody prepares you for a life after foster care – the emotional trauma, the childhood development dysfunctions, the lack of skills necessary for success. Once you're out of the system you're not their problem anymore – you're on your own! And the world doesn't care if you live or die. Life After Foster Care – A Survivor's Guide is just that – a guide to help you navigate your post-foster care world. Whether you are just getting out of the system or have been out for decades perhaps the words in this book will help you understand why you feel the way you do and what you can do about. "You don't have to be a statistic. You can be as successful as the next guy so long as you put your head down and work for it, using all the discipline you have to focus your pain into something positive. If I could do it you can too!!" Tom Mann June 2020

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