

How to Break the Cycle of Abuse

Can we ever really be free from painful memories? Yes, God can heal you completely.

The small, south Texas town where I grew up has Spanish moss drooping from the trees, winding narrow streets and stifling humidity to which in time I became accustomed. The lazy days of summer brought us a good game of baseball, fishing at the lake or swimming in the Gulf of Mexico. Children filled the placid streets with bikes and roller skates. It was a simpler time, and our town—population 5,000—was a simpler place.

The closeness we shared as friends and family gave us a sense of security. Most everyone knew one another, so there was little need to lock our doors at night or fear walking the streets alone. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1956, I encountered a reason for insecurity: sexual . I was 6 years old.

The abuse ended after several months, but the gates of my soul were flung open to life-altering trauma and pain. I had become a victim, and at age 12, I experienced victimization once again. This time it was a stalker, who made obscene phone calls to our home when he knew I was alone.

At 17, I was nearly raped by a young man with whom I was working in ministry, and at 18, a trusted male friend, who's romantic overtures I'd rebuffed, appeared at my home in the middle of the night, screaming nonsensical words and throwing stones at my bedroom window.

It would be years before I would recognize the pattern of this cycle in my life and know how to stop it. Once the door of victimization and trauma is open in your life, it remains open until you slam it shut.

Today, almighty God has rescued me from the web of victimization. I've shut that door for good, and you can too.

MEMORIES AND MEDITATION

When abuse of any kind occurs, memories form. Over time our minds often either diminish or exaggerate our recollections because our ability to remember is imperfect. This is one reason why investigators interview witnesses right at the scene of the crime or as soon as possible.

As we meditate on our memories—whether accurate or inaccurate—our emotions engage and we can easily build a house of lies about the situation or about ourselves. Here is a sampling of some of those lies:

- We assume new identities—as “victims”—and allow our experiences to define us, determining who we are.
- We judge and demean ourselves because we have mentally embraced the idea that we’re “worthless damaged goods.” We lose self-respect, which affects the way we dress, the friends we make and the things we do.
- We fall victim to false guilt. Absorbed in denial, agony, or escape, we sometimes assume we deserve the abuse we received, otherwise it wouldn’t have happened.
- We blame God for what happened. It’s easy to forget that we live in a fallen world where men and women choose to be ungodly. We assume God controls people, but humans are not puppets—we have moral freedom for which we, not God, are responsible.
- We believe God abandoned us in our trauma. Therefore, He can’t be trusted. I’m surprised by the number of people I encounter at the altar asking for prayer, yet admitting they can’t trust God because of past hurts. God didn’t abandon you—He grieved right there with you.
- We conclude that everyone is out to get us.

As we meditate on memories, whether accurate or inaccurate, our meditation establishes a mind-set. As attitudes are

formed, mental strongholds are built. Unseen signals are sent, like when young boys secretly tape signs to each other's backs that say, "Kick me!"

It's as though there's an invisible invitation on us that sends out subconscious signals to others, saying, "Abuse me, please." Evil people and evil spirits read the messages sent by our body language or words.

Self-Defeating Mind-Sets

The Bible says, "As he thinks in his heart [meditation], so is he" (Prov. 23:7 NKJV). Once you have meditated long enough on your trauma, the cycle of abuse, like poured concrete, becomes set. You will attract and yield to more abuse from others because you now feel hopeless, helpless and defeated.

Negative words fall from your mouth—just as faith comes by hearing (see Rom. 10:17), despair comes through condemning words, and the more you say the words, the more you believe them. As the powers of darkness pick up on your cowering posture and your fatalistic words, they influence you to become anti-social.

Unable to see your downward spiral, you might begin to dress and act in ways that put others off while you withdraw from or avoid meaningful relationships. Gloomy and defeated, you may resort to self-destructive actions that become seemingly uncontrollable, building in momentum (through demonic empowerment).

Often the abused becomes an abuser by engaging in activities such as eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, bingeing, excessive fasting); self-mutilation (cutting, tattoos, piercing); or, damaging behaviors (overeating, stealing, drug use, rage, criminal activity, nicotine, alcohol, sexual sin and perversion).

DEALING WITH PAIN

When you've been subjected to trauma—physical beatings, abandonment, sexual abuse, satanic abuse and so on—your emotional responses reveal the ways you're coping with the pain. Here are three typical human reactions.

1. Redirection. We redirect our attention, change course, or go the opposite way to avoid or postpone the anguish. A man in pain may become a workaholic—shifting his focus from his woundedness to his work—to avoid difficult emotions. An angry woman may become depressed and give up on life by taking drugs or gorging on food.

Others resort to abusive behavior, taking out their fury on their spouses or children. One may become the “all-American guy” who wins the trust of others, takes their money and then skips the country with millions. Many sink into despair, shutting down internally, withdrawing from life and becoming vulnerable to spiritual oppression.

Many of us are skilled at redirecting and disguising. If this includes you, are you willing to close the gates of depression, pain and abuse? You have been given authority through Christ to take action!

In *Freedom From Fear* (Harvest House), Neil T. Anderson, Christian author and founder of Freedom in Christ Ministries, observes that we are “living in an age of anxiety. People all over the world are paralyzed by fear of anything and everything but God. Anxiety disorders are the number-one mental health problem in the world.”

2. Repression. We also often deal with pain by internalizing it. We allow our hearts to be filled with anger or bitterness, and then when we experience a circumstance too stressful to bear we may even explode, sometimes with dangerous consequences.

A root of bitterness occurs when we make judgments about an offense, a situation, words spoken or actions taken against us

or against someone we love without properly forgiving and resolving the issue. When our pent-up emotions continue to fester and boil over the same series of circumstances, there is potential for bitterness to take root.

I want you to see that this can be more than a physical or emotional problem: The gates of bitterness open us to a realm of demonic activity that stands ready and more than willing to “supersize” our offense. So how do we uproot bitterness?

- Make a list of friends, family, business associates, or anyone else in your life, including yourself, against whom you might have formed judgments. (Remember: God is judge, and when we form judgments, we are attempting to unseat Him.)
- Find an accountability partner to whom you can confess your bitterness. Remember, this isn’t a gripe session, but a confession session. If you don’t have anyone to share with, don’t despair. God is “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24, NIV).
- Ask the Lord to open your spiritual eyes to any bitter-root judgments that continually cycle in your life (“All men are controlling like my father,” or “White people like Mr. James are always racists”). Make a list of what God shows you.
- Pray and release (don’t ask the Lord to release—you release) each person who has hurt, offended, or violated you.
- Name them one by one and forgive them. Ask the Lord to forgive you for judging them.

To refuse to forgive a person is to say: “Lord, it was nice that You shed Your blood on the cross as payment for the sins of the entire world. However, Your dying wasn’t enough to pay for the sin that _____ did to me. Come down from Your throne, Jesus, and let me sit there so I can judge those who’ve hurt me.” Is that what you really want to say?

- Now, say aloud to the powers of darkness, “I break the bitter-root curses that I’ve embraced as a result of judging others.”
- Next, ask Jesus to cleanse you with His cleansing blood. You could pray something like this: “Precious Lord Jesus, I apply the powerful blood of Your sacrifice right now. Please break all the bitter-root judgments in me, and apply the sweet fragrance of healing to my spirit, mind and emotions. Lord, show me how to love and serve _____. In Your name. Amen.”

3. Self-Medication. Finally, some people try to appease their deep-seated hurt with unnecessary prescription drugs, Internet addictions, romance novels, adultery, masturbation, media obsessions, fantasies, alcohol or other distractions to temporarily salve the wounds. These don’t cure the hurt—they simply cover it. Inside there are open, festering wounds yet to be healed.

Ask the Lord to give you fresh revelation about yourself. Do you overwork, demand perfection from others, or blame them relentlessly? Do other improper behaviors numb your pain?

Do you have a tendency toward bitterness and anger—are loved ones never sure when you will explode next? Are you dependent on drugs, nicotine, or alcohol?

Lay all this “junk” at the foot of Christ’s cross and let His blood cleanse you. Confess your sin to Him right now (see 1 John 1:8-9). Let go of everything! Tell the Lord your hurts.

Cry out to Him for complete healing. Don’t hold anything back. Today is your day of new beginnings. Let your healing begin.

TAKE HOLD OF YOUR LIBERTY

As one who resisted abusive cycles for years, I’d like to paint a mental picture of how liberating it is to be free from torment. Several years ago I was teaching in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, a former Soviet nation nestled in the heart of the

ancient Silk Road.

My host invited me to enjoy a day of sightseeing. With the gorgeous high-peaked Ten Shan Mountains on the horizon, the crisp fall air was nothing like the sticky, often humid climate of my Texas Gulf Coast.

The snows hadn't yet fallen, so we climbed into ski lifts—I loved the feeling of my legs dangling as we ascended. Up and up the lift moved until we got to the summit. The sheer majesty of God's mountains, casting a colorful hue from the sun, was breathtaking, more than words can describe.

At that exhilarating moment, it was time to stop thinking about the intense ministry schedule I had maintained for the last eight days. Atop that huge mountain I let go of my tiredness, my concerns and my problems, and then the large perspective of a vast world opened up to me. If I had been focused on the ski lift holding me, or on my fear of falling, or on my terror that I'd be abandoned at the top, my experience would have been wasted.

Friend, as long as you are consumed with your past struggles, your mundane daily routine, or your pity party, you will miss all the adventures awaiting you. Join me in this journey called life. Let's go up, up and embrace all that God has for us.

Read a companion devotional.

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