

ASCA Rotation C Reader

The following is an introductory list of suggested topics with readings for Rotation C meetings. There is no particular sequence. Meetings choose according to their desires and needs. If you have suggestions for topics, please let us know your thoughts. Co-facilitators, along with the other meeting members, are also encouraged to develop topics that would be helpful for their particular meeting.

The topic readings are intended to be read in Rotation C meetings. However, if you discover an alternative reading for a topic that you think would be more beneficial for your meeting, that would be permissible to use as well. The week before a Rotation C meeting, co-facilitators should announce the topic, so participants can reflect on it. Some meetings also find it helpful to make copies of the reading and pass them out the week before, so participants can prepare.

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1. Support

It is important for us to remember not to try to recover in a vacuum. We need others to hold us up and sustain us, especially during the early phases of our recovery. Many of us have developed a protective pattern of withdrawing from people.

As children, we were often alone and secretive about being abused. Most of us had to deal with the resulting pain, shame, and confusion alone. We often felt isolated and different. We learned to cope without the assistance of others, and we carried this pattern into our adult lives. As adults, however, we do not have to be alone.

Sometimes, we feel that we have few people that we can talk to or get support from regarding our recovery. Practicing reaching out and turning to others for support is a crucial task in our transformative process from victim to survivor to thriver. Learning to nurture, maintain, and add to our support system challenges some basic notions that arise from a history of child abuse, namely that people are dangerous, uncaring, and untrustworthy. Our experiences in ASCA meetings reveal that people do care and are trustworthy. Part of our task is to appropriately increase the number of caring and trustworthy people that we are involved with in our daily lives.



2. Safe and Secure

Feeling safe and secure are the basic blocks upon which we sculpt a renewed image of ourselves. Whether we are beginners or veterans in the process of transforming ourselves, we need a framework of physical and emotional safety and security in order to progress in a healthy manner. At its core, child abuse is about being and feeling unsafe. In part, child abuse was the ongoing insecurity of knowing that no one was able to guarantee our safety. We need to feel safe in order to change, in order to take the necessary risks that bring about growth in our lives.

Safety is a deep-rooted feeling that no harm will come to us. Safety is the lack of anxiety concerning the possibility of danger and injury. *Security*, on the other hand, is more like a deep-seated belief in one's self. This belief notes that, as adults, we can alter and change our environment to increase our levels of safety. Security is knowing that we have the power to act and to change. When we were children, we did not have power. We did not know how to be proactive to guard against the abuse. Being abused as children is part of our history. Feeling safe and knowing that we are secure is an ongoing project in our everyday lives. We have made significant changes and we will continue to make them to increase our sense of safety and security.



3. Confronting Our Abusers

Whether, when, and how to confront our abusers are difficult questions. Ultimately, we each make these decisions for ourselves, given a wide variety of variables. There are no right or

wrong answers. What may be helpful for one person may actually be detrimental to another person. For some of us, confronting our abusers means direct confrontation, either face-to-face or by letter or phone. For still others, it may mean writing articles, stories, or newspaper op-ed pieces, or speaking out in public gatherings. And for still others, it may mean pursuing legal action to gain restitution for the abuse suffered. For others, confronting their abusers may mean more of an internal coming-to-terms with the abuse, but may not involve direct confrontation.

Everyone is different in their need to confront their abusers. Confrontation of any sort, and especially legal action, can be very disruptive to life in general and to the process of moving on with our lives. Before confronting our abusers, what is most important is firmly establishing a support system, weighing the possible consequences of what the confrontation will do, and having realistic expectations concerning the results of confronting our abusers. For some of us, confronting our abusers is a necessity, and for some of us, it is not. We may even take different positions on the question of to-confront or not-to-confront with the passage of time and the evolution of our recovery process. Each of us is our own best judge concerning this decision.



4. Validating Our Memories

Some of us may have crystal clear memories of being physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or neglected during our childhood and/or teenage years. Others may have only a vague sense of being abused and may question whether they were abused at all.

Recalling, articulating, and questioning our recollections of past abuse are all part of the validation process. We all had to survive the abuse, and we all took many different avenues to survive as children and later as adults. Some people have been so traumatized by their abuse that they have literally blocked the memories until such time as it is safe for them to recall them. Others may remember that their abuse occurred but may not remember the exact details of their abuse or confuse the details with other material.

Sometimes, it may be helpful to focus on being neglected and emotionally abused. For some people, this is easier to validate than recalling the physical assaults or the sexual exploitation. Paying attention to our feelings and our bodies is often supportive of the cognitive memories of the past. When we were younger, our abuse experiences—whether physical, sexual, or emotional—were usually not validated. Few of us were taught how to validate these experiences. Instead, many of us were taught to deny or to minimize the abuse. Therefore, it seems reasonable

that we would have some difficulty, at times, validating our memories. This is one area, in particular, where we need to be gentle with ourselves.



5. Self-Soothing

One of the more important skills for us to learn is how to emotionally soothe ourselves. Most of us never learned to self-soothe in childhood because parents who abuse are also often poor at soothing themselves and, consequently, at teaching their children to self-soothe. However, it is essential to our transformative process that we develop some capacity for self-soothing. We will need these skills as we proceed through the various stages of our recovery.

Soothing is what good parents do when their children are upset. It often involves soothing touch that is warm and comforting. It can involve words that are reassuring, empathic, and hopeful. It may involve activities that are physically, intellectually or sensorially nourishing, such as taking a walk, reading a favorite book, or sharing a special meal. It can also involve daily practices that are spiritually uplifting and inspiring, such as meditation.



6. Self-Sabotage

Where *low self-esteem* is the primary feeling of most adult survivors, *self-sabotage* is the corresponding behavior pattern. Self-sabotage is any kind of conscious or unconscious behavior that undermines our successful functioning in the world. Self-sabotage may range from buying a “lemon” of a used car, to losing one’s checkbook, to becoming involved with an alcoholic

partner, to engaging in life-threatening activities.

We may allow ourselves to be exploited by a boss or engage in physically harmful or potentially dangerous activities, such as cutting or unsafe sex. Typically, one's pattern of self-sabotage is closely related to one's personal issues and family history. If we grew up in an addictive family, our self-sabotage may be driving under the influence. If we grew up in a violent family, we may tend to get ourselves beaten or injured, physically or emotionally. We might find ourselves losing money, getting swindled or having poor money management skills.

Self-sabotage is often linked to our instinct to become re-victimized in a way that continues or replicates the past abuse. Sometimes, the self-sabotage is not directed against ourselves, but rather against someone we love. Reversing self-sabotage begins with building awareness of everything we do in our daily existence that sacrifices our happiness, satisfaction, and productivity.



7. Self-Esteem

Enhancing our self-esteem is a major task for us. Chronic feelings of being bad or unworthy are intricately connected to all the other “self” words that we use to describe ourselves because of the past abuse, such as self-effacing, self-deprecating, self-conscious, self-blaming, and so on. At times, our low self-esteem causes us to become our own worst enemies by turning against ourselves in a damaging reenactment of our past abuse.

There are many abuse-related factors that contribute to low self-esteem. The way our parents or abusers treated us, the message they conveyed about our personal value and worth, the amount of power they granted us, and the degree of control we had over our own lives, are a few examples. Of course, there are also a host of non-abuse-related factors that can lead to low self-esteem. Concerns about our physical appearance (especially during adolescence), our progress in school, our social standing among our peers, and our family's financial or social position may all contribute to feelings of low self-esteem.

While self-esteem stays relatively constant over the years, it is still a learned behavior and, as such, can be changed by rethinking and reworking our old attitudes and perceptions about ourselves. Although we may have inherited low self-esteem from our childhood years, with focus and daily nurturing, we can empower ourselves to slowly change the way we think and feel about ourselves.



8. Power of Appreciation

Cultivating a sense of appreciation is the single most important disposition for our lives and our recovery process. Thinking in an appreciative manner gives direction and adds a sense of meaning to daily life. When we think appreciatively, our thoughts and feelings tend to gravitate toward what we value as precious and important. Thinking appreciatively places life into perspective.

Appreciation is an active, reflective, and focused awareness that evokes gratefulness and thankfulness. Appreciative thinking is accompanied by the recognition of a truth. This truth announces that there is something special and valuable that presently exists in our lives. It may be in reference to oneself, others, or a life situation.

When we appreciate, our hearts open. We experience a filling-up and then a glow. A sense of well-being envelops us. We feel comforted and contented. These sensations well up within us because our spirit is literally being nurtured. Appreciating oneself, others, or a life situation unfolds as refreshing, renewing, and supportive. Appreciative thinking adds substance, meaning, and purpose to our lives. When we appreciatively dwell, we may experience being blessed. We may literally feel touched by the creative finger of God, by the pulsating energy of the universe, or by the warming breath of Mother Nature.

Questions

1. How is the power of appreciation presently influencing your life?
2. How has, and how can, a cultivated sense of appreciation add to our recovery process?



9. Giving Meaning to Our Suffering, to Our Abuse

In Viktor E. Frankl's classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he describes and reflects on some of his experiences as a prisoner in several Nazi concentration camps during World War II. One of the themes developed throughout his book is the importance of making sense out of senseless suffering and brutality. Frankl reflects that prisoners who were able to introduce meaning into their daily lives—to give meaning to their endless pain and torment—fostered an increased capacity to grow as human beings, even though they were in a devastating situation of dehumanization. They not only survived the concentration camps, but also went on to live fulfilling lives free of bitterness and hatred after their liberation.

When we were children, it was difficult, if not impossible, to create meaning out of the suffering we endured due to the child abuse inflicted on us. But as adults, it is essential for our inner growth and our ability to move on with our lives to reflect, to give meaning, and to make sense of the senseless suffering we encountered. This is important since, as adults, we have a choice. We have the freedom to give and to define the meaning of our senseless suffering. The meaning we choose to give to our past child abuse suffering helps to focus and direct our daily lives. The meaning is like one of the pairs of eyeglasses we wear to see and interpret our lives and the reality around us.

Questions

1. What are your thoughts about the meaning of your child abuse and the meaning of your suffering?
2. How do you make sense of the senseless suffering and abuse you experienced as a child?



10. Enjoying Life Today

Most survivors would probably agree that recovering from childhood abuse is work. It takes determination and effort, courage and focus, energy and resolve. Amidst all this work, however, how do we enjoy our lives today? How do we take pleasure and delight in what is going well in our lives today? What is enhancing our lives today?

Working too much at our place of employment or in our chosen career can bring about burnout, fatiguing us physically, mentally, and spiritually. Likewise, we can exhaust ourselves with our recovery work. Unintentionally, we might instill bitterness and resentment toward our recovery rather than experience our recovery efforts as nurturing, life-giving, and freeing. Having a balance of enjoyment in our daily lives is important for its refreshing, re-creating, and invigorating qualities.

Questions

1. What are the areas of my life that I enjoy?
2. How does trying to enjoy and celebrate my life today support my recovery?
3. What do I do that may hinder and prevent me from enjoying my life today?
4. How can I maximize the enjoyment and celebration of my present life?



11. Moving Beyond Resentment

Resentment is a feeling of ill will or indignation arising out of an unresolved grievance. If we were to measure resentment, it would begin at a moderate level of unfriendliness, moving toward the more intense level of hatred. Resentment manifests itself not only within our emotional life, but also within our body and our spirit. When we feel resentful, our bodies feel tight and constricted. Our blood pressure increases. Sometimes, our feelings of resentment are manifested in healthy and/or unhealthy behaviors. For example, we might appropriately write a letter or confront the person. We might verbally or physically strike out at the person, and/or we might hold our resentment inside ourselves where it festers and poisons us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. From a spiritual perspective, our resentment might close us off from the beauty, goodness, and wonder around us. Our focus may be narrowed in reference to life's meaning and fullness.

Part of the recovery process from childhood abuse is resolving our grievances against our perpetrators, direct or indirect collaborators, and various compliant institutions within society. The first part of dealing with our resentments is to acknowledge them. We feel resentful toward someone because they hurt us in a variety of ways, and this is unresolved. Second, we need to reflect on how we are being influenced and changed physically, emotionally, and spiritually because of unresolved grievances and resentments. This may also involve listing the advantages and disadvantages of holding on to or working through this particular resentment. Finally, if we determine that we require the cooperation of the person(s) we are resentful of in order to resolve our grievances and resentments, the task may become nearly impossible.

Most perpetrators, and even most direct and indirect collaborators, will not be sufficiently cooperative. Depending upon the other's response of goodwill—or usually lack of goodwill toward resolving the grievances—resentment may hold us hostage for a very long time. This may result in distorting, twisting, and misinterpreting much of life. Resentment—a destructive venom injected into us during our experiences of child abuse—has a way of deforming our lives. Consequently, resolving grievances and resentment has more to do with our attitude toward ourselves and life than with the response from the other person or parties. This is one of the insidious aspects of childhood abuse. If we want to be free of the grievances and resentments that bog us down, that prevent us from moving on with our lives, then we need to search deeply within our hearts. What do we really want? Do we want and choose to hold on to grievances and resentments, or do we want and choose to move toward freedom?

Questions

1. With whom do I feel resentful and why?
2. What is this resentment doing to me physically, emotionally, and spiritually?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages for me to hold on to or to work through this resentment?
4. Do I need the cooperation of the person(s) I am resentful of to resolve my grievances with them?
5. What would my life look and feel like if I were free of this grievance and resentment?



12. Resentments: What Do We Do with Them, What Do They Do to Us?

Resentment is the indignation and ill will we experience as a result of injustice, meanness, and/or unresolved grievances. Many of us who have survived child abuse have specific resentments and feel resentful toward our perpetrator(s), family members who are in denial, and a society that tells us to just get over it. Unfortunately, unresolved resentments have a way of invading and poisoning our lives. But how do we go about resolving resentments when so many perpetrators continue denying their past perpetration and are unwilling to cooperate, to join in a process of resolution and reconciliation?

First, it may be helpful to articulate our resentments. What exactly are our resentments, specifically and generally? Second, what are the feelings that come up for us around these specific and general resentments? Articulating our resentments and feelings might help us to clarify and get a handle on them. Third, when we realize that we have unresolved resentments, it is important to understand what influence our unresolved resentments are having on our daily lives.

Some of us may experience that our unresolved resentments have little effect on our lives, that they are minor irritants that pop up every now and then. On the other hand, some of us may realize that our unresolved resentments are significantly affecting our lives, turning us into bitter, hostile, sarcastic people who may be unpleasant to be around.

Questions

1. What are the signs and indications that our present resentments are poisoning our daily lives?
2. What are some of the things we can do to resolve or move toward resolution of some of our resentments, especially when our perpetrators are uncooperative?
3. What might be some of the rewards for us moving toward resolution of resentments?



13. Embracing Change

Change is the gateway to evolving and growing, to moving toward our potential, and to moving on with our lives. Everything within the universe constantly changes, from subatomic particles to microscopic cells, to our bodies, to the largest of the galaxies. Without ongoing change, we would stagnate. We would become like rocks and boulders with time, and the influence of the environment would be our only notion of change. Without change, it would not be possible to develop and mature, to learn from our mistakes, to create possibilities, to improve our lives, to hope, to dream. Ongoing change resides within every dimension of our lives. Change exemplifies the customary and usual way of life.

Sometimes, we experience change or certain types of change as welcoming, freeing, or relieving. At other times, change is difficult, troublesome, and even wrenching. Once in a while, we dig in our heels. We refuse to change. We become stubborn, obstinate, and/or uncooperative, thus closing ourselves off from possibilities, growth, and cooperative engagement. Occasionally, when parts of our lives begin to change, we experience fear, discomfort, alarm, anxiety, and depression. When such feelings emerge, we often become agitated, distraught, angry or disoriented. We simply do not like, desire, or want this change, this evolution, or this new development. We resent and resist. We harden our hearts. We close ourselves up.

For some of us, change has something to do with predictability, control, being in charge, power, mastery. Why? We were not in control as children when we were abused; we did not have power and mastery over our lives. Therefore, we sometimes find it difficult to embrace change. As adults and for the most part, predictability, control, being in charge, power, and mastery are illusions. What is not an aberration is our faith in ourselves and in the community of survivors.

Through our recovery endeavors, we have become adaptable, flexible, flowing, versatile, and limber with life.

We have experienced positive change and have learned to change and to not fear change. To change is to try to live life.

Questions

1. When I am confronted with change and I start to feel uncomfortable, anxious, or disagreeable, what are the trigger issues that activate my uncomfortable feelings?
2. What is the hidden wisdom within this perceived change?
3. What are the consequences for me if I choose not to cooperatively change?



14. Confronting and Resolving

Confronting someone implies coming face-to-face, usually with a sense of defiance or hostility. *Resolving* involves finding a solution, bringing it to a successful conclusion. Confronting and resolving are different. Many survivors of child abuse decide to confront their abusers and their willing or unwilling collaborators, such as family members.

Confrontation can be accomplished in a wide variety of ways, i.e., face-to-face, by letter or telephone, one-on-one, within a group. In our decision to confront, it is important to be aware of our primary motivations for confronting and what we hope to accomplish by confronting. Every survivor's situation is unique. Consequently, careful consideration seems in order concerning confronting perpetrators and family members. Most people become defensive and close themselves up when they are confronted. Many become hostile and attack. Many survivors report a sense of empowerment when they confront others. Others report feeling devastated.

Resolving, on the other hand, has more to do with ourselves than with others. In Step 18, we state that "I have resolved the abuse with my offenders to the extent acceptable to me." For some of us, resolving involves confronting. For others, resolving has little to do with confronting. Resolution of our past child abuse has more to do with what is acceptable to us, what we want, but within the context of reality. Most abusers and family members do not respond the way we would like. Therefore, each of us needs to decide what "resolution" means at different points in

our ongoing recovery process.

Questions

1. What has your experience been in confronting your perpetrator(s) and family members?
2. What has been your experience in attempting to resolve past abuse with your perpetrator(s) and family?
3. Concerning confronting and resolving, what has worked for you? What has not worked for you?



15. Revenge

Revenge is a strong emotion. Many of us experience feelings of revenge. Revenge is a natural human experience. Adolph Adler cites four basic motivations for human behavior:

- 1) the need for attention;
- 2) the need for power;
- 3) the need for justice; and
- 4) the need for skills.

The flip side of justice is revenge.

The need for justice is important. It helps to put the world in order and make it a comfortable and safe place to live. It is satisfying to believe that life is fair and that we will be rewarded according to our abilities and actions. When life is unfair and we are hurt and harmed, it is human to want others to feel as bad as we feel, especially those who have wronged us.

The basic human desire for justice can lead to fantasies of revenge. Thinking thoughts of revenge and acting on them are two different things. Thinking vengeful thoughts does not make us bad people. It only proves that we are human. As long as we do not act on these thoughts and desires, we are okay.

Practicing noticing our thoughts of revenge without judgment can be helpful. We might say,

“Oh, there are my revenge thoughts again.” Then let them go. Do not give them any more energy. What we think affects how we feel. If you think vengeful thoughts, notice how you feel afterwards, and what you say about yourself. You may be the only one you are harming by these thoughts, not the person or people responsible for your abuse.

Questions

1. How do or did your revengeful thoughts affect you?
2. What do you do to help bring about justice in your life in reference to your past abuse?



16. Cultivating Trust in Our Lives

Since child abuse fundamentally results in the fracture of primary relationships, one of its insidious legacies influencing our daily lives is our tendency to close off and close down our hearts. Such closing-off and closing-down result in eroding basic trust in the people, events, and things of our world. Closing off and closing down our hearts looks like cynicism and pessimism, suspicion and contrariness, negativity and criticism, argumentativeness and disagreeableness. It is void of awe and wonder, of appreciation and compassion, of kindness and gentleness. Abuse abrasively wears away our predictable and often childlike, taken-for-granted reliance and confidence that we spontaneously extend to people, events, and things in our world. Prior to repetitive incidents of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse or neglect by a parent, sibling, relative, family friend, teacher, clergy, etc., we freely and instinctively opened our hearts without reservation, without hesitation, without resistance. An open heart makes trust possible. Open hearts permit trust to germinate, grow, and prosper.

Cultivating trust in our lives today has more to do with practicing trying to open up our hearts than with dealing with our past perpetrator(s) or even past incidents of child abuse. Cultivating trust does not depend, rely, or hinge upon resolving the past.

Cultivating trust begins with trying to open up our hearts to the people, events, and things of the world today, in the here and now. Just like a farmer who was devastated by last year's drought can still enjoy a prosperous crop this season because of the renewal of seasonal rains, we, as survivors of child abuse, can still enjoy the dividends of trust by practicing opening up our hearts today.

Questions

1. When my heart is closed up, what does it feel and look like?
2. What are the ramifications in my life when my heart is closed up; when it is open?
3. What have I found helpful in trying to open up my heart to people, events, and things of the world?



17. Control: A Paradox

Control, being in control, and having control over our environment and life circumstances seem important to many of us child abuse survivors. When we were children, when we were being abused physically, sexually, and/or emotionally, we were not in control of our environment and our life circumstances. Ironically, our perpetrators were not in control either. Rather, they were out-of-control.

To be in control is to possess influence and authority. *Control* is to regulate, manage, and direct. It also implies restraint and proportionality. But what does it mean to have control over our environment and life circumstances? If control is an illusion, as some would say, then what do we really crave concerning control and being in control?

Two images come to mind. The first is the image of a horse, buggy, and driver. The driver loosely holds the reins to influence, manage, and direct the horse. The reins are relaxed with sufficient play in the driver's palm. The secret to having authority over the horse and buggy is restraint and proportionality. When needing to turn the buggy, the driver gently adjusts the reins in hand ever so slightly and lightly, thus directing the horse to turn in the desired direction.

The second image reveals a parent who is blue in the face from trying to control a 2-year-old child or a 16-year-old teenager. The parent is all worked up and exasperated, and their body is tight, straining, rigid, driven and locked in a battle of egos and wills—influence and authority, regulating, managing, and directing seem impossible. The qualities of restraint and proportionality seem missing from the equations and the interactions.

Being in control and having control over our environment and life circumstances seems to require restraint and proportionality above anything else. There seems to be an equation whereby

the more energy and exertion we expend in a situation, the less control we actually possess. The paradox of control seems to imply that restraint and proportionality are two primary keys to healthy control in reference to our environment and life circumstances.

Questions

1. What does it mean for me to be in control of my environment and life circumstances?
2. In trying to control a situation, what do I really want?
3. How can I promote a sense of restraint and proportionality within my daily life?



18. Thankfulness: Placing Daily Life into Perspective

Living daily life from a thankful orientation helps us to appreciate more of who we are today, how far along in recovery we have traveled, and how precious various people in our lives are to us. Cultivating thankfulness supports us in living life from the perspective that our cup is half full rather than drained and half empty. Cultivating thankfulness has a long-lasting and reinforcing effect on not taking for granted everything that is beautiful, functional, sacred, and plentiful in our lives.

By cultivating thankfulness in our everyday lives, the colors of life seem brighter, the hassles and difficulties of daily life seem manageable and less intrusive. The way we interact with people, and especially with ourselves, seems increasingly gentle and inviting. Cultivating thankfulness opens our hearts to the wonder and the possibilities that surround us.

There are many ways to cultivate thankfulness. One practical way is simply to choose thankfulness as a meditative theme. During spare moments, transition moments, we could dwell on the theme of thankfulness as a meditative energizing pause. We wake up in the morning and remind ourselves that today's theme is "thankfulness." By simply attending to and acknowledging what is good about our life today, what is working well, what brings pleasure, beauty, and enjoyment into our life, this all cultivates thankfulness.

Over a period of days and weeks, our orientation toward living life seems to be pointed in the primary direction of thankfulness. We move from a stance of taking much of daily life for granted to one of reflective thankfulness. This musing with the theme of thankfulness unfolds as

a soothing salve, an energy booster, and an instructive teacher.

Cultivating thankfulness is the gateway to hope; the coal for stoking the furnace, promoting the heat and passion for life; the restorative power that continuously renews and refreshes our daily journey.

Questions

1. What have been the consequences in my life for not cultivating a sense of thankfulness in my daily rhythm?
2. How will cultivating thankfulness affect the usual way that I approach my day, other people, and the tasks that I undertake on a daily basis?
3. What are some practical ways that will assist in cultivating a thankful orientation in my daily life?



19. Holidays: Lost & Found

Holidays often evoke the full range of feelings for many survivors of childhood abuse. Usually, a puzzling mixture of hurt and sadness, joy and warmth, shame and loneliness, acceptance and hope, anxiety and depression, pleasure and wonder, dread and tension, etc., wells up within our being. These feelings and accompanying memories almost feel embedded in our bodies and our spirits, encased within the very fiber of who we are.

For many survivors, holidays bring nothing but dread, resentment, anguish, and unhappiness. Yet other survivors have managed to instill the holidays with aliveness, generosity, compassion, joy, and enthusiasm—a renewed spirit.

Part of the holiday spirit seems to have been lost, some would say stolen. What did we lose? What was stolen from us? We lost out on part of a child's innocence, joy, and wonder. Many lost out on cherished, sustaining, nurturing memories. Many have lost the holiday spirit itself, with its warmth, reassurance, and sense of hope.

Yet, most of us look and yearn for something more from the holidays. We want to experience some

of the season's joy, hope, warmth, and enthusiasm. Many of us need to reconfigure, re-manage, and rewire ourselves for a renewed sense of holiday spirit. Holidays seem to have something to do with spirit, that intangible flavor of life.

The keys to finding and reclaiming the holidays for ourselves seem to rest on what we want from the holidays and how we begin to regenerate for ourselves a sense of holiday spirit. Holidays were lost. But they can be found and enjoyed again.

Questions

1. What do the holidays evoke in you?
2. What did you lose? What was stolen from you in reference to the holidays?
3. What are you looking for from the holidays?
4. What might be some of the things that you need to do to renew for yourself a sense of holiday spirit?



20. Looking Forward: Forming the Future

Throughout the year, transitional dates like New Year's Day, a birthday, an anniversary, or events like a graduation, geographic relocation, a birth, or death, provide us with events with which to pause and reflect, to assess, and dream. These moments encourage us to look forward and to imagine what the future can hold for us. In looking forward, in imagining our future, we initially lay the groundwork, the basic formation for tomorrow's future, next month's future, next year's future...

Balancing between looking back, especially concerning our past childhood abuse, and looking forward to the lives that we would like and deserve to have and the kind of person we would like to be can be challenging. It is difficult, some would say almost impossible, to look forward to our future when we have not fully disclosed the story, the people, and events of our past abuse. Usually, the secret, the hidden, the closed, and the suppressed become the major obstacles to imagining and forming our future.

Looking ahead and shaping our future does not necessitate nor require resolving, healing, fixing,

reconciling, or rectifying all the various elements of our past abuse. As long as we have thoroughly told our story, we no longer use our daily life energies to hide, suppress, or deny. Forming our future has more to do with the practical everyday scenarios of planting seeds, taking concrete steps, and doing.

Questions

1. What occasions or events tend to encourage you to pause, to reflect, to assess, to dream about your future?
2. How do you negotiate the balance between looking back and looking forward?
3. What are you doing to pause, to reflect, to plant seeds, to take steps to form your future?



21. Depression: The Yoke of Childhood Abuse

We all know, though it differs from person to person, what depression feels like: the energylessness, the lethargy, without purpose, the dread, the disinterest in life, etc. Depression is perhaps the single most universal feeling and experience that survivors of childhood abuse tend to share with each other. Depression's insidiousness creeps into our very core, coating and cooling our being; our spirit like an ice storm in winter; coating, freezing, and encasing anything uncovered and unprotected.

Questions

1. What are the usual characteristics of your style of depression?
2. How does depression creep up on you at this stage of recovery?
3. Are there situations in your life that promote and/or increase your depression?
4. When depression zaps you, how do you go about soothing yourself?
5. Looking back on past episodes and experiences of depression, was there anything that helped to lift the depression?



22. Courage: Recovery's Adhesive

Courage is usually defined as a quality of spirit or mind that permits a person to confront fear and/or danger with confidence and bravery. Many books and articles which elaborate on recovery from child abuse mention the need for courage in order to pursue recovery.

Courage does not eliminate nor diminish the feelings of fear, apprehension, anxiety, uneasiness, dread, etc. Courage does not remove nor lessen the dangers that we face throughout recovery, the possibility of rejection, the denial of others, the betrayal of family, the general minimization by society, etc. Rather, courage is that type of spirit-filled energy, that focus and determination of mind, that helps us to stand our ground, to speak the truth, to re-experience the world with new eyes and ears, with an open heart and an open mind.

As a quality of spirit or mind, courage is something that requires cultivation. We cultivate courage by spending time during the week dwelling on and reflecting on the various aspects of courage. We imagine what it feels like to be full of courage. We review past situations in which we acted courageously. We anticipate upcoming encounters that will require mustering up our courage. We practice by role-playing scenarios either in our minds or with others that involve us being courageous.

Questions

1. What is your experience of courage?
2. What do you believe is the role of courage in your recovery efforts?
3. On a practical level, what can you do to foster courage in your daily life?



23. Exploring Relationships

Many survivors of childhood abuse acknowledge that establishing, fostering, and continuing relationships in their many and diverse forms is challenging, frustrating, and scary. On the other hand, most people, in general, find relationships difficult and problematic as well. For us survivors, special concerns around trust, consistency, manipulation, as well as physical and emotional intimacy, contribute as stumbling blocks to healthy, satisfying, and fulfilling relationships.

In relationships, we participate in a process of connecting and joining with another person or with a group of people. To begin exploring what relationships are all about for us, it might be helpful to examine and elaborate on the following questions.

Questions

1. What are my unique gifts that I have to offer in a relationship—as a spouse or partner, a friend, a colleague, a parent, a family member, a neighbor, etc.?
2. What are the five major nonnegotiable characteristics that must exist within a relationship in order for me to connect and to join the relationship, e.g., mutual respect, etc.?
3. What are the five major behaviors that will exclude me from continuing in a relationship, e.g., physical violence, etc.?
4. What did I learn about relationships during my childhood and teenage years?
5. When I say that I want to be in a relationship, what exactly am I looking for in that relationship? How would I articulate what I am looking for?



24. Money and Finances

Many survivors of childhood abuse, as well as people in general, have mixed and confusing feelings concerning the matters of money and finances. One of the projects of adulthood is to take care of ourselves financially, usually through employment or through shared family responsibilities, as in the case of a parent who attends to the domestic chores but does not earn an income. Often, survivors sense that they have been held back from educational opportunities, career possibilities, and sometimes just the basic ability to maintain steady employment due to their childhood abuse.

During our childhood and teen years, we may have been plagued with depression, anxiety, PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder, ADD—attention deficit disorder, and learning disabilities, which hindered our ability to attend to schoolwork. During our teen years, we may have felt inadequate, not good enough. We may have lacked self-esteem and thus the ability and confidence to experiment with the world around us. If grammar and high school did not go well, we probably did not pursue college or a trade. To mask our pain, we may have used drugs or alcohol to numb the pain and memories. We may have tended to drift, not being able to focus, to set life's priorities, to have a vision for our lives or a dream to pursue.

Dealing with money and financial matters can be overwhelming and uncomfortable. In our efforts to come to grips with any unresolved concerns around money and finances, the following questions might be helpful to think about.

Questions

1. What are my basic attitudes and feelings concerning money?
2. While growing up, what did I learn about money?
3. How do I use money today?
4. How does having money or not having money influence my daily life?
5. What unhealthy and unhelpful habits do I have about money? What is their source?
6. What are two or three actions that I need to take in reference to money matters in my life?



25. Sadness

When we pause and reflect back upon our childhood abuse, sadness usually fills our hearts. A heavy sense of sorrow and a kind of weighted fatigue seem to envelop us. Sadness is possibly the boiled-down, reduced sticky essence of the effects of childhood abuse. No matter how much work we spend on our recovery, no matter how much growth and rejuvenation we experience, when we sit and ponder what happened to us as children of abuse, we will always experience a certain sadness, heavy-heartedness, and lowness of spirit. Sadness is a type of mourning that comes in waves and diminishes with time, but never totally disappears. In a sense, there is a part of our hearts that will always be fractured due to the betrayal, due to the pain that we experienced in our youth.

There are other life experiences that might also weigh on our hearts, leaving us feeling sad. The death of a loved one, the loss of a significant relationship, the destruction to our lives and bodies caused by chemical dependency, a life-threatening illness or a catastrophic accident are but a few examples of life experiences that leave us saddened, heartbroken, and downcast.

There are two aspects of sadness that require investigation. One thing is not to fight the sadness. Allowing the sadness to wash over us like a wave, feeling its heaviness, and simply allowing ourselves to feel the sadness is helpful. Why? Because what happened is sad and we probably did not have sufficient opportunity to experience the sadness when we were children or teenagers. When we try to fight sadness, we waste considerable energy. We only deceive ourselves, trying to trick ourselves into thinking that we are not sad when we are sad. It's a waste of energy. A good cry is much more rejuvenating than trying to convince ourselves that we are not sad.

A second aspect of sadness is that the object of our sadness needs to be placed into perspective within our entire life. Sadness will always be a part of our heart's ache. Yet, our heart, which has infinite capacity, is also full of many happy, fulfilling, energizing experiences and memories. In a sense, balancing the sadness is to celebrate all that is going well, all that we have accomplished, all that we cherish. It is not denial to say something like, "Yes, it is sad what happened to me. I do feel sad. Yet, there are many things going well for me. I have many wonderful experiences and memories that sustain me, that encourage me, that help me through the day."

This is balancing our lives, giving full measure to the sadness, but also full measure to the celebration of what is going well. The antidote to sadness and other feelings that may seem negative or uncomfortable is not to deny them, but rather to cultivate and to balance the other side of the feeling spectrum. We can sometimes become lost in the forest of recovery. When our lives focus only or mostly on the past, the negative, the pain, then we lose our balance. We lose perspective. We end up denying the other valuable aspects of our lives.

Questions

1. What are your experiences of sadness as related to your childhood abuse recovery?
2. When do you see yourself denying your sadness?
3. What is a helpful way for you to allow sadness to wash over you?
4. What is your experience of trying to balance the sadness with the celebration of what is going well for you in your life?



26. Telling Our Story

Perhaps the single most powerful aspect of our recovery process, especially during Stage One recovery, is the telling of our story. Our “story” usually includes 1) the circumstances surrounding our abuse; 2) the factual details of the various incidents of abuse (physical, sexual, and/or emotional); 3) the experiences of our family members and our elders responding and/or not responding to the abuse; 4) the effects of the abuse throughout the years; and 5) our struggles and successes with recovery.

The importance and the potential positive impact of telling and retelling our story in its many manifestations can never be underestimated. The storytelling process improves our memory of the past and decreases its negative emotional impact on our present lives. It curtails our tendency to minimize and deny what actually happened. By clarifying the abuse’s effects on our lives, it provides perspective on that which we need to focus on in order to continue to move on with our lives. It diminishes the scary nature of the abuse and lessens the fear we have of the people who abused us. Telling our story to whomever has the capacity and willingness to listen removes the burden of singularly carrying the horrendously heavy load of memories. Telling and retelling our story is a process that gives way to freedom from the desolation of the past, to liberation from the

chains that hold us back from being the people we desire to be.

There are many ways and tools to tell and express our story. Some include talking to and with others individually and within groups; writing the story as historical fact; composing poetry; drafting a play; choreographing a dance; painting and drawing; creating a video; dictating a series of audio tapes. Some of these avenues of relating our story of abuse include other people, and some can be done successfully alone and privately. A combination of expressions is probably more helpful than a single expression of telling and retelling our story of abuse and recovery.

Questions

1. What has been my experience, thus far, of telling my story?
2. What have been the benefits to my life and recovery process of telling and retelling my story?
3. Are there other avenues I can pursue that I have not yet used concerning telling my story to enhance my recovery process?



27. Maintaining a Relationship with a Past Perpetrator?

One of the more heart-wrenching considerations for adult survivors is whether and how to maintain a relationship with a past perpetrator(s). For most people, this process reveals a horrendous array of potholes. Our perpetrators were almost always family members and, more often than not, parents or foster parents. As an adult, and irrespective of the type of relationship we may have maintained in the past, our choice to expand or limit our relationship with a past abuser remains fluid. Nothing is ever set in cement. We always have a choice, though it is often perplexing, difficult, and painful.

Each of us makes a variety of ongoing decisions based on our particular circumstances and desires. It may be helpful to have a healthy degree of suspicion of people and books that focus on one-size-fits-all answers to this complex question. An ongoing dialogue within ourselves might be helpful in exploring some of the following questions.

Perhaps the first question to struggle with is what do we mean by a relationship? A relationship could simply be a civil, polite acknowledgement of the perpetrator, such as at a family gathering.

On the other hand, a relationship might involve investing part of our hearts.

A second set of questions might explore what kind of relationship do I want? What is my realistic assessment of the perpetrator's ability to engage with me in the type of relationship that I want? What are the parameters of the relationship, i.e., what am I willing and not willing to do to foster the relationship that I want? Given my current knowledge, what scenario of an unfolding relationship appears likely and realistic?

A third set of questions might include whether I might be blind, or that I might be setting myself up for disappointment and frustration. What is the risk/reward equation for this relationship? Am I looking to regain something that I lost as a child in this relationship? If so, as an adult, what are the possibilities of regaining this aspect of the relationship, or has time simply erased its possibility?

Thinking about maintaining a relationship with a past perpetrator raises a wide variety of questions and feelings. Perhaps the bottom line for many of us points to the simple question—is maintaining a relationship with a past perpetrator at this time in my life a healthy or unhealthy endeavor?



28. Criticism Versus Praiseworthiness

Some of us tend to be quick to criticize others and even quicker to criticize ourselves. We can be harsh, severe, and disapproving. Our abusers and collaborators were often heavy-handed with their criticism, their faultfinding, and their unfairness. Their oppressive style kept us fearful, off balance, subservient, and vigilant. Being a part of a family that overflowed with criticism, we quickly developed an inclination to seek, to call attention to, and to exaggerate our errors and faults. We learned to humiliate ourselves, to doubt our capacities, to minimize our accomplishments.

Although some of us can be critical and sharp-tongued with others, this pales in comparison to our keen ability to self-impale and to stick sharp-tongued daggers into our own hearts. Many of us experience much distress, suffering, and discouragement due to our preponderance toward self-criticalness. As a habit, criticizing feels so natural. It just seems so natural to pick and pick and pick some more at ourselves. Criticism and lack of appreciation often set us up for the one-two punch of low self-esteem.

Most survivors find it difficult, nearly impossible, to ease off the self-criticism. It happens so quickly. In a sense, our hearts are like pincushions. We take the prickly pins of daily life and, with no alternative available, we pin them to our hearts. We criticize, judge, and find continual fault with ourselves. Criticalness is the opposite of praiseworthiness. As comfortable as we are with criticizing ourselves, many of us find it equally—if not more difficult—to think about ourselves in a praiseworthy manner.

One possible way to experiment with re-balancing criticism with praiseworthiness might be to just dwell in general on the theme of praiseworthiness. As often as possible throughout the day, let us try to think about the general praiseworthiness of people, events, and things that we see and encounter. This exercise might assist us in gradually becoming comfortable with the general stuff of praiseworthiness.

For example, we might admire a garden we pass. We might commend some gesture of hope and civility we read about in the newspaper or hear on the evening news. We might applaud some action or accomplishment of a friend or family member. The idea is just to begin thinking and dwelling on the theme of praiseworthiness. As we increase the weight of praiseworthiness in general concerning the people, events, and things in our lives, we might, as a consequence, begin to incorporate a bit of praiseworthiness into ourselves. If we increase praiseworthiness in and around our lives, there is simply less room for criticism.

Questions

1. What has been your experience of self-criticism?
2. What has been your experience of praiseworthiness?
3. What have you tried in the past to diminish criticism and increase praiseworthiness?



29. What Does it Mean to Have a Sense of Self?

We attend a gathering with many people with whom we are unfamiliar. We introduce ourselves. We ask the standard and polite ice-breaking type questions. Behind the statements that my name is _____, I work at _____, my family consists of ____, and my favorite hobbies are _____, etc., who are we really? Fundamentally, who are we as human beings? At our core, in our heart of hearts, what is our sense of who we are as individual human beings?

What is your sense of self?

Do we define ourselves by what we do, how we perform, what we produce, what we accomplish, what we achieve, what goals we pursue, and by the label(s) that others or we apply to ourselves (e.g., mom, dad, doctor, teacher, white collar, blue collar, laborer, manager, survivor, etc.)? Or do we gather a sense of who we are by investigating and cultivating the matters of our heart (that we intentionally and persistently strive to be compassionate, reflective, kind, appreciative, receptive, etc.)?

The performance definition focuses on the functional nature of life. These functional aspects of life possess rules, judgments, and yardsticks by which we measure them. However, we often measure incorrectly and judge ourselves harshly. The heart's definition of self reveals a self that seeks and tries to live life through virtues like compassion, kindness, patience, etc. From one perspective, having a sense of self can derive from and be dependent on what we do. From another perspective, having a sense of self can be based upon our heart and how we try to live our lives in a virtuous manner.

Is a sense of self a psychological and/or a spiritual understanding and undertaking? We often speak of self-esteem in psychological jargon. But self-esteem seems more an aspect of the outer shell of our personal sense of self. When we speak of our self-esteem, we often invoke our feelings. "I feel good about myself. I feel energized and excited about life." Or we might say, "I feel depressed and I feel inadequate." I feel anxious and I feel limited. For many people, their self-esteem and sense of self are often dictated and overshadowed by their feelings. Although being aware of our feelings and expressing our feelings are important, feelings can also distort and slant reality when they are not truthfully and genuinely exposed and tested against concrete reality. For example, we might say to ourselves, "I feel inadequate. I am not a successful person." But in all reality, when we truthfully and genuinely examine our lives, we discover that we are indeed good, caring, generous people who try their best. We are successful in living life.

Having a sense of self may be more like the flavors and spices that we use in daily life. In daily life, we try to add the flavors of compassion, appreciation, patience, reflection, courage, kindness, etc. So, when we perform a task, we try to perform it in a respectful manner. When we move toward accomplishing a goal, we try to accomplish the goal in a reflective manner. When we pursue an activity, we try to pursue it with a sense of appreciation. Having a sense of self seems to have more to do with the manner in which we try to go about living our lives, rather than with our concrete performance and achievements. When we focus on the way—the manner—in which we live, in which we try to proceed through our daily life, we always win, we always come out ahead because we have a sense of who we are.

Questions

1. What has been your experience of your sense of self?
2. How do you differentiate between your sense of self and your self-esteem?



30. The Holidays: A Stress-Filled Time of the Year

What do the holidays evoke for you? Some people feel weighed down with painful and disturbing memories. Other survivors feel conflicted with thoughts about good times during the holiday but also recall some horrendous recollections of abuse, chaos, fighting, etc. Many people long for the mythical and elusive Norman Rockwell picture of playing out the holidays that the news media dangles constantly in front of us, like a thousand blinking lights strung around a tree, alluring and mesmerizing us.

One thing that seems universal about the holiday season is the acknowledgement and growing acceptance that the holidays are full of stress. Stress derives from a wide variety of circumstances and reasons. If we travel, there is the stress of being away from the comfort and reassuring surroundings of our home. If friends or family visit, there is the stress of the responsibility of providing and taking care of many details. For many, there is the stress of purchasing presents, participating in parties and gatherings, and being swept up in the holiday mentality. Not feeling in control is another form of stress during the holidays. Feeling resentful and conflicted that we should be up and cheery when in reality we are down and sad is another kind of stress for some.

Like in any other difficult situation, thinking through and developing a plan to handle the inevitable stress that comes along with the holiday season might provide us with the best possible way of dealing with the holidays.

Questions

1. What has been your experience of the holiday season?
2. What are the sources of stress for you during the coming holidays?
3. How might you proactively reduce the stress on yourself during the holiday season?



31. Maladaptive Patterns and Destructive Behaviors

While working through our recovery, we often see in books, hear in ASCA shares, and possibly experience in our own lives, concerns around maladaptive patterns and destructive behaviors. Maladaptive patterns are embedded systematic thoughts and/or behaviors that are unhelpful and unproductive in our everyday lives. For example, thoughts involving self-criticism and put-downs are common maladaptive thought patterns. Behaviors such as confusing sex for love, drinking or using drugs to escape emotional pain, or eating to soothe emotional discomfort or emptiness, are also common examples of maladaptive behavior patterns.

Destructive behaviors include cutting, hitting, addictions, and behaviors that are mean, antagonistic, and/or abusive toward oneself or others. Destructive behaviors tend to damage bridges, resulting in an isolating effect. When we harm ourselves, not only do we cut ourselves off from other people, we also disengage and separate the body, mind, and spirit from their congenial integration. When we are in a destructive behavioral mode, our eyes are blinded, our ears are closed, and our hearts harden and turn cold.

Maladaptive patterns and destructive behaviors are unsuccessful ways of coping with life. We may have learned them through negative role modeling while growing up. If we come from a highly dysfunctional and/or abusive family background, we probably never had the opportunity to learn positive and nurturing thought and behavioral patterns and behaviors. In a crude adaptive manner, we often reenact and duplicate the maladaptive patterns and destructive behaviors we learned while growing up and/or adapted to cope with a painful life.

One way to go about changing a maladaptive pattern or destructive behavior is to first single out the pattern or behavior. Then, figure out its opposite, or antidote. Third, through thoughts and/or behaviors, engage and practice the antidote. For example, if I am in the pattern of criticizing myself, then I might practice acknowledging the parts of myself that I like, that are successful, and that are whole or moving toward wholeness.

For example, if physically abusing myself is part of my destructive behavior, then I might engage in the antidote of taking leisurely baths to soothe my body. I might apply sensual and fragrant lotions to my body to moisturize and vitalize my skin. I might treat myself to a manicure, pedicure, massage, and/or hair styling on a regular basis.

We cannot do two things at once. We cannot nourish the body, mind, and spirit while at the same time hurting and harming the body, mind, and spirit. The more we try to nurture, the less opportunity there is to use maladaptive and destructive behaviors in our everyday life. Sometimes, maybe even often, we do not feel like doing x. Just like sometimes we do not feel like going to work, or when we were students, to study. Sometimes, we just have to do it. Sometimes, we just have to go through the motions of taking a relaxing bath, of applying soothing lotions to our skin. It might take 100 baths before the body begins to enjoy and soak in the experience of nurturing baths.

Part of reducing maladaptive patterns and destructive behaviors simply involves trying. Trying provides us with hope, encouragement, and eventually the insightful experience that we can change.

Questions

1. What are some of your maladaptive patterns and/or destructive behaviors?
2. What do you understand to be their opposites or their antidotes?
3. What have been your successful strategies in changing your patterns and behaviors?
4. What do you think might be some of the obstacles to trying?



32. Shame: The Clinging Residue of Abuse

Shame adheres to most of us. No matter how much resolution we seem to achieve in our recovery from childhood abuse, shame seems to cling to us, just like gluey sap from a pine tree. Pine sap, like our shame, sticks to our fingers, to our spirits, even after repeated washing, even after intensive recovery work. There is less sap, but we can still feel its leftover stickiness on our fingertips. There is less shame, but we sense that it lurks right around the corner, ready to gum up and disrupt our lives.

Healthy shame occurs when we do something wrong, like betraying a friend, behaving cowardly, promoting harm, etc. Remorse accompanies healthy shame. We acknowledge that we have done wrong. We feel guilty and try to make amends in order to right the wrong and reconnect with the offended person(s). On the other hand, *unhealthy shame* occurs when we have not done anything wrong yet we blame ourselves. We are totally innocent, yet we perceive in a distorted and false

manner that we are co-conspirators. We accept some of the responsibility for the wrongdoing. Unhealthy shame tampers with the truth and blurs reality.

When we experience shame from our past child abuse experiences, it seems to arise in part from a sense of guilt, humiliation, and/or embarrassment.

First, shame, as a painful emotion, intensifies when we feel guilty that we in some way caused the abuse to happen. We feel guilty when we accept responsibility for the abuse, even if it is only a small part of the responsibility, rather than holding our abusers accountable. The guilt intensifies our shame. Part of shame's remedy calls us to hold our abusers firmly responsible for their vile behaviors. In addition, we need to renounce repeatedly that we were responsible in any way whatsoever for the abuse. When we hold our abuser(s) totally and wholeheartedly responsible, it is like using paint thinner to cut through the sap of shame.

Second, shame also infects us since the physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse we experienced as children humiliated us. Through repeated abusive behaviors, we were reduced from the status of a unique human being to a common ordinary thing. This ongoing experience of humiliation oozed with shame and dripped with dishonor, disgrace, and degradation. A child or teenager is not capable of coping with such humiliation and humiliation's discrediting ways. To cope, many abuse victims assumed the rank of the insignificant, unworthy, inadequate, and unimportant. The restorative for humiliation seems to rest in trying to live a respectful life. When we appreciate, extend goodwill, and value others and ourselves, then we reverse the downward spiral of humiliation. We restore our sense of respect, value, and esteem.

A third aspect of shame that can be even more difficult and insidious is the shame brought on by embarrassment. Many of us feel embarrassed that we come from dysfunctional and/or abusive families. We feel embarrassed that our fathers, mothers, siblings, relatives, and close family associates used our innocence, trust, and goodwill for their twisted pleasure, for the target of their displaced rage, for their emotional underdevelopment. We feel embarrassed that we have been or continue to be in some way associated with these people. Through no fault of our own, we may have ended up with abusive parent(s), hurtful siblings, evil relatives, or despicable people, who referred to themselves as friends of the family. We feel embarrassed by this association, which increases our shame.

We are probably embarrassed because we care about—we are invested—in some manner, and we are concerned about what other people think about us and about the family from which we come. We want too much for people to think well of us. We are often afraid and concerned that if they knew our background, they would think ill of us, and that they would not like us nor want to socialize with us. Because I might care more about what others think than what I think, I unfortunately distort my pride. When we build our lives on the foundation of false pride, we will often contort our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to fit the mold that someone else designed. In many ways, the relief and solution to this type of embarrassment-based shame is detachment from pride. (The concept of pride and detachment will be a future discussion.)

Questions

1. How would you describe your experience of shame? How do you experience unhealthy shame?
2. Do you experience unhealthy shame by taking responsibility for the abuse you experienced as a child or teen?
3. What is your experience of shame through humiliation?
4. What is your experience of shame through embarrassment?



33. Trust: Only If They Cherish

Life is miserable without trust, without relying upon others. Many survivors of childhood abuse often comment that they are reluctant to trust others. For many survivors who have been hurt and harmed by people in positions of trust when they were children, trusting others as adults is often difficult, scary, and anxiety-provoking. From one perspective, the problem is not so much that we lack the ability to trust. Rather, the problem seems to be that we want to trust certain people who are unworthy of our trust, who are untrustworthy, and who are incapable of cherishing our trust.

Anyone who purposefully (or consistently but unintentionally) hurts, wounds, harms, abuses, wrongs, assaults, betrays, neglects, injures, etc. us, is unworthy of our trust. It would be a mistake to place our trust in them. They simply are incapable of handling our trust. It is a simple fact. Although we might want to trust them, although we might want to give them another chance, their behavior clearly demonstrates that they are incapable of cherishing our trust.

Trust is a type of investment in others. Being wise, prudent and using some common sense is helpful. Assessing in a practical way whether a person is capable, worthy and can cherish our trust is a prudent thing to do. If they cannot honor our trust, even though we may want to trust them, we should not trust them. When a big Mack truck is barreling down the street, even though there is a red light for the truck to stop, it might be prudent to wait and see if the truck stops before walking across the street. Likewise, with trust, we do not need to invest substantial trust in someone until we know and are assured that they will respect and hold dear our trust.

Trust is not an all or nothing entity. We can test the waters by giving a person a little trust. If they handle and cherish our trust well, then we can invest a little more trust in them. If they do not respect our little bit of trust, then we can withdraw the trust with minimal effect on us. We often come across the saying that people should earn our trust. That is, we should be able to ascertain that they can handle some measure of our trust before increasing our level of trust with them. Incremental trust can be a helpful way of taking reasonable and prudent risks. Trust is important in our lives. We need not fear trust; we need just to be wise and prudent with whom we invest our trust. Not everyone is capable of cherishing our trust.

Questions

1. What has your experience of trusting others been like?
2. How do you place trust in others who are unworthy of your trust?
3. How can you increase your wisdom and prudence in assessing the trustworthiness of others? What are some typical signs that point to the untrustworthiness of others?
4. What are some typical signs that suggest that a person is capable of receiving more of your trust?



34. Resistance: The Rusty Hinges of Recovery

Resistance, both a common everyday experience and a standard psychological concept, somewhat resembles the rusting hinges on the doorway to our ongoing recovery. If we tug, pull and force the rusty hinged door to give, to release, to deny its rustiness, a high probability exists that in trying to pressure the door open that there will be a break, a fracture, an unhinging of the door. More harm and more mess seem to occur in our lives when we use force, harshness and/or impulsiveness than when we approach problems, difficulties and dilemmas in a thoughtful, gradual and light-handed manner.

Everyday resistance includes putting off unpleasant tasks like household chores, deferring tax preparation until April, dieting, exercising, etc. Resistance within our recovery process might look like avoiding reading that article or book on the subject of abuse. Or forgetting to make that call to a psychotherapist, a support group, or deferring confronting our abuser or a family member. Or not acknowledging that our abuser is possibly emotionally bankrupt, which may

necessitate appropriate distance from him or her. When we lift the lid off of any type of emotional resistance, we can look and peer down into the pain, hurt, displeasure, distress, discomfort, dislike, etc., that functions as the rusting resisting agent.

For example, a wife and mother may resist seeing and then acknowledging that her husband is abusing her children. The resistance, or the rusting agent, is the distress, hurt, and anger that would accompany such an acknowledgment. The resistance, the rusting agent, prevents her from seeing the reality around her. Another example might include the difficulty that many survivors experience in trying to enhance their self-esteem. If they should think and feel well about themselves, then it might create confusion and conflict concerning, “If I am such a worthwhile person, why was I abused?” They will probably also resist seeing and acknowledging that they are wonderful, enjoyable, and have many skills. They resist since the concepts do not fit their mindset, and because they feel uncomfortable thinking positively about themselves. Or, in thinking well about themselves, they may decide to venture off and try to have the life that they want. This might necessitate leaving everything behind, and it probably scares the dickens out of them.

From a basic psychological perspective, what causes us to be resistant is often, but not solely, fear, hurt, pain, displeasure, anxiety, discomfort, etc., whose roots tend to be more unconscious than conscious. We tend to avoid pain and discomfort because most of us are not masochistic. Look at how many people resist losing weight that their medical doctors have advised. We resist losing weight not because we lack the strength, will, or knowledge that it is good for us, but perhaps because we will feel deprived, hungry, or empty if we do. We resist these feelings. Many survivors feel such a high level of deprivation that the thought of dieting, i.e., purposefully depriving themselves of food, a primary pleasure in our day, is an unpleasant and unthinkable choice. For many people, eating is a way to deal with anxieties of various forms. For some survivors, they need the weight as a guard against being perceived as attractive and physically inviting. For many people, these types of feelings and hunger bring up a wide variety of unresolved issues from their lives. Furthermore, some survivors with excess weight have a medical condition that causes them additional problems and challenges and has nothing to do with resistance.

It might also be helpful to consider the concept of resistance as an aspect of change or the inability to flow with change. Many people feel stuck, incapable, unsettled, anxious or fearful of change. We might say that we would then have a certain degree of rigidity, inflexibility, adamancy, and/or intransigence concerning our unconscious or conscious refusal to try to change, to try to change our situation, to try to change by looking at ourselves or a situation from a different perspective. So, part of my resistance might also have something to do with my concerns around change.

The question now arises, how do we deal with our personal resistance, with the rustiness on our door hinges to life, on our door hinges to recovery? What might be the solvents and lubricants that dissolve and loosen the rust, the resistance? Since resistance tends to be more unconscious than conscious, dealing with resistance directly is often not possible and, in the least, difficult and frustrating. Forcing ourselves is usually counterproductive, like tugging and pulling on a rusty door. We can force ourselves to wash the kitchen floor, but we really cannot force

ourselves to stop being resistant to that which on an unconscious or conscious level is perceived as being harmful, unpleasant, overbearing, offensive, painful, depriving, etc.

On the other hand, doing nothing or having no alternative to dealing with our resistance is similarly unhelpful. So maybe one possible practical approach to the various forms of our resistance would be more along the lines of fostering the opposite of resistance. Perhaps the opposite of resistance will eventually be the solvents and lubricants that dissolve and loosen some of our rusty resistance. For example, the opposite of resistance could include concepts like flexibility, pliability, responsiveness, adaptability, resiliency, letting go, surrendering to reality, detachment, acceptance, effortlessness, etc. So, by focusing, for example, on becoming more flexible and tolerant in general, this type of stretching, flexing, and broadening exercise may help us deal with our resistance in general. Naturally there are other ways people deal with resistance.

If we could force ourselves, we would have already conquered our resistance long ago. Most of us are strong people. We are survivors, walking on the road to being thrivers. We have strength, stick-to-itiveness, persistence, etc. Unfortunately, strength, perseverance, and force are not the issues or the answers in reference to our unconscious or conscious resistance. Ironically, dealing with resistance seems to have more to do with the attraction or complementarity of opposites than the head-on confrontation of the illusive resistance. We resist, but can we bend?

Questions

1. What has been your experience of emotional resistance?
2. Can you name some of your areas of resistance?
3. How have you tried in the past to resolve your basic areas of resistance?
4. What has been helpful to you in the past concerning dealing with your areas of resistance?



35. Our Experience of Recovery

The lived experience of recovery from childhood abuse seems as varied and diverse as the uniqueness of each survivor. Yet, within recovery's uniqueness, a commonness, usualness, sameness, and a prevalence of experience seem to appear, as different people describe and list their experiences of recovery from childhood abuse. Dwelling with our experiences of recovery has many advantages.

On one level, it is heartening to describe and to list our experiences within recovery. It is in part our story of how far along in the journey—in the process—we have already come, even if we are beginners. On another level, reflecting back upon our experiences of recovery thus far provides hope, encourages our steadfastness, instills energy, acknowledges our growth, and offers a glimmer of the new emerging self (Step 20). Still, on another level, recounting our experiences might also provide additional self-guidance concerning how one should continue to proceed, what might be our current priorities, what might be the upcoming obstacles to our recovery efforts, etc.

You might find it helpful to respond to the requested descriptions and questions that follow.

Questions

1. Describe your experiences with helpful people who have accompanied you thus far in your process of recovery from child abuse. What has this experience with these helpful people done to you and for you?
 2. Describe your experiences with unhelpful people who seem to have obstructed, complicated, burdened, or confused your process of recovery thus far. What have been the outcomes of these experiences with unhelpful people for you and your recovery process?
 3. Describe your struggles, ambivalence, pain, and fear surrounding your recovery process up to this point in time. What have you learned about yourself through your struggles, ambivalence, pain, and fear?
 4. Describe your basic movements, any areas of growth or change, any rewards or joys that have transpired since you have been working on your recovery from childhood abuse. How have these movements, areas of growth or change, rewards or joys enhanced your life thus far?
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