

Healing the Scars of Childhood Abuse

Moving beyond the Past
into a Healthy Future

Dr. Gregory L. Jantz, PhD
WITH ANN McMURRAY



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This book is dedicated to Lonnie Hull DuPont. Her support over the years has been invaluable, as has her steadfast commitment to bringing hope through the written word at Revell. Thank you, Lonnie, for your tireless advocacy for the hurting, especially the children of abuse.

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Introduction

Finding Your Way Forward

Something dreadful happened on the way to adulthood for far too many children. Perhaps you're one of them. Perhaps the childhood you so desperately wanted didn't happen for you. Instead, your childhood wasn't something you dreamed about; your childhood was a nightmare you survived. And for some of you, just barely.

Childhood is supposed to be a loving, nurturing, and empowering time for children to be strengthened and supported into adulthood. When childhood abuse enters into that picture, that reality becomes torn and tattered. How do you find a way to pick up those fragments of your life and move forward?

As a professional therapist, I've heard that question asked in innumerable ways over the years. I've heard that question asked by women and men of different ages, beliefs, backgrounds, and economic circumstances. The question is, in many ways, a universal one.

While the question may be universal for those who have experienced childhood abuse, the answers are extremely personal. This book is written as a guide to understanding the challenges

of overcoming childhood abuse, and I'll present information in a type of overview. However, this book is also written to help each reader reach back into their own childhood and then move forward for those personal answers that create healing and recovery.

As an author, I know I couldn't possibly write down all the answers. As a therapist, I know I don't have all the answers in the first place. What I do have, as an author and as a therapist, are the questions. I've known for years that I can't heal anyone. What I can do is help people understand the questions so they can find the answers to hopefully help ease the hurt in their lives.

Is the search for answers difficult? Yes, but people who reach the point of searching are already in pain. The pain, their own or the pain of their family and loved ones, is a powerful motivator to find the way forward—past the discomfort and into a more positive future.

I believe that while the past affects the future, the future need not be enslaved to the past. Yesterday cannot be changed, but tomorrow hasn't been written yet. Each new day brings the promise of hope. I've found in my own life, both personally and professionally, that hope is incredibly powerful. You will find great hope in asking questions, because behind every question lies the hope of an answer. As you read this book, discover your questions, search for your answers, and hang on to hope. Watch for hope to do amazing things.

1

The Hide-and-Seek of Childhood Abuse

Everyone knows there is no perfect family. No father is always loving and patient and engaged. No mother is always understanding and helpful and kind. No older sibling is always inclusive and attentive and affectionate. No younger sibling is always respectful and considerate and agreeable. Those who enter into a family do not always embrace all members of that family. Behind closed doors, people can and do act badly, make mistakes, and give in to their weaknesses. The perfect family, the perfect parent or sibling, the perfect childhood is an ephemeral dream that evaporates in the harsh light of human failings and unforeseen circumstances. Yet I have come to believe that the idea of perfect is still a compelling dream for children, and the adults they become. Children dream of a life where they are truly loved and cared for, and wish for that dream with all their might. When they are deprived of that dream, children mourn its loss, through frustration, disappointment, anger, regret, and tragically, blame and shame.

As they wish for and dream of the what-if perfect life, children learn to settle for something much less. Their lives may not be perfect, but what about normal? Normal makes you no better or no worse than everyone else. Normal means that when bad things happen to you, those are “just because” instead of “because of me.” Normal protects against shame. Reaching for normal can take the target off your back. Considering your life, such as it is, to be “normal” can depersonalize the difficult.

A person can look back on a difficult childhood through a lens of normalcy. But when does normal stop being normal and become something else? When does that continuum of perfect-to-normal veer off into the realm of abuse? When does the pathway from everything you wish for plummet into everything you fear?

Children live in a world where their choices are made for them and power over their lives rests in the hands of adults. Within that state, what child wants to acknowledge a horrific childhood, with little hope and no end in sight? Isn't it better to use the one power children do have—the power of imagination—to pretend things aren't so bad?

“I kept running away from the truth that I wasn't loved,” Judy admitted. “I guess, in a way, I've always been running away from it. Growing up, I didn't get what I so desperately wanted. Now, I never will. How do I accept that?”

Judy is like many people with a background of childhood abuse who I've encountered over my years of counseling. As an adult, Judy wanted to be able to claim a perfect childhood for herself, where she was loved and special and cared for. Intellectually, as an adult, she knew that hadn't happened. Emotionally, to cope with the loss, she settled for viewing her childhood as not great but, at least, normal. Judy's childhood, though, was not normal. Oh, she caught infrequent glimpses of what a normal childhood might look and feel like. These scraps of affection were enough to keep an emotionally starved child alive one more day, surviving on hopes and dreams and desperate wishes for more.

Do you remember, as a child, being trapped in some difficult or traumatic event and shutting your eyes and telling yourself that whatever it was would soon be over? As long as you didn't look at it or hear it or acknowledge it, the bad thing surely would go away. "Don't think about it," you would tell yourself. "Find a way to get beyond it, then pretend like it didn't happen." Children find such ways to survive difficult things. They tell themselves over and over again it isn't so bad. If there's no escaping the bad, then they pretend it isn't so bad. Admitting the bad just makes it more real.

Truth and Illusion

This book is about the torment of childhood abuse. Children, sadly, are abused in too many ways, from physical beatings to sexual exploitation to psychological torment. I have found children, and the adults they become, have similar ways to cope with the nightmare of their childhood abuse. Many camouflage their abusive past under the gloss of normalcy and the rationale of "it wasn't so bad." Others have no illusion about the wretched nature of their childhoods. They are quite aware that the verbal tirades or the beatings or the sexual abuse were not normal. Yet they still desperately seek to conceal their past from others under a shroud of normalcy. Some know their lives were not normal but consider themselves, not the actions of others, the source of the abnormality. They blame themselves and seek to hide their shame.

For children who have been abused, I have found hiding behind a curtain of normalcy is a way to survive the past. Stopping to really look at and accept the past as not normal can feel like experiencing a death—the death of the dream of "what should have been." When that dream is all you have to hold on to, why in the world would you want to let it go? Why exchange a comforting fantasy for a painful reality?

My hope is to answer those questions, to give you reasons to accept your past, abuse included. My hope is to provide you with a way to separate what parts of your life you can claim as normal and what parts of your life were not. And, most of all, my hope is to help you untangle shame and blame, what you knew growing up from who you are now. To paraphrase the Serenity Prayer, my hope is for you to accept the things about your childhood you cannot change, find the courage to change the things you can, and gain wisdom to know the difference so you can move forward with your life.

This wisdom to know the difference between truth and illusion is not easy to come by. If you've lived a great deal of your life under an illusion, how are you to see the truth? How do you go back and look at your life and decide where your experiences fit? What was truly normal? What was, sadly, abusive? And are you the only judge? What if you were never physically beaten or sexually exploited? When there are no welts or bruises or broken bones, no molestation or penetration, were you still abused? What about emotional abuse?

Societal norms add another layer to these questions. Back when you were growing up, "normal" looked different than it does now. For example, what used to be considered proper parental discipline in some circles is now acknowledged by many as physical abuse. Some sexual customs, once considered private and inviolate, are now viewed as sexually abusive and societally unacceptable. In the past, how a child was psychologically treated was considered irrelevant, as long as the child had a roof over their head, clothes on their body, and food to eat. Now, however, the psychological treatment and mistreatment of children is increasingly studied and given special importance.

What Is Childhood Abuse?

With lines shifting and cultural views changing, just what is childhood abuse? To understand what falls under this spectrum of

childhood abuse, I have found it helpful to focus on not only the behaviors but also the effects of those behaviors. I believe childhood abuse is a systematic, persistent pattern of psychological, physical, and/or sexual behaviors that denigrate and devalue the identity and worth of a child. This childhood abuse shows itself in, I believe, four distinct and often interconnected ways—through emotional or psychological abuse, through physical abuse, through neglect, and through sexual abuse.

Childhood abuse is multilayered. Neglect and physical and sexual abuse are always accompanied by devastating emotional damage. This childhood abuse can appear as aggressive actions of harm as well as passive failures to act. Childhood abuse can manifest as a pattern of behavior over time but can also encompass a single severe and traumatic event that undermines a child's sense of self, immediate safety, and long-term security.

I will spend time going over various types of childhood abuse, the effects of such abuse, and ways to overcome and heal from abuse. But before I can do any of those things, I need to first deal with what I have seen as a significant barrier to healing from childhood abuse, which is this persistent clinging to the illusion of normalcy.

What about you? What was your normal? Perhaps your normal growing up was a house full of yelling, cursing, and chaos. You may have grown up routinely being slapped or kept from food or sleep. Your bedroom, when you were younger, may have been a place, not of dreams, but of nightmares. These situations were part of your normal life. You didn't like living like that, but you didn't know any other way. That life was normal for you and you found a way through it. You may have even felt pride that you survived and turned out as well as you did. Or you may, to this day, still experience deep shame regarding how you were treated and hide behind the curtain of normalcy. Regardless, you did what you had to and got by another day. Truthfully, the last thing you

want to do now is go back and relive what you've been trying to put behind you.

Others of you, early on, understood your “special” status; you knew you weren't normal and believed you were to blame. You couldn't hide from the truth of your abuse; instead, your goal was to hide the truth of your abuse from others. You didn't want anyone to know how you were being treated because of the deep guilt and shame you felt. The horror of your abuse was always accompanied by the terror of someone discovering your humiliation and degradation. Deep down, you believed you were at fault. Either you deserved what happened to you or you were too weak to stop it. If others found out, they would blame you too and do nothing to protect you. You pretended to be normal to hide the truth you weren't.

If this is how you've dealt with the pain of your past, this illusion of normal may have become so engrained that it has taken on a life of its own. The illusion seems much easier to deal with than the truth. You may be trying to live your life completely in the present, avoiding any mention of your past, beyond the façade of normalcy you've hidden behind for years.

Bringing the Past to the Present

Going back and dealing with your past may not be what you want to do, but I firmly believe it is what you need to do. Words that bite and scratch and dig deep into the soul leave scars. Neglect and abandonment create holes of deprivation that resist being filled. Being used for the sexual gratification of others steals away identity and worth. Physical, sexual, and psychological wounds leave scars, whether hidden or acknowledged.

Rick looked back on his childhood as pretty normal. He lived in a normal house, in a normal neighborhood. Sure, his dad would periodically take a belt to his backside when he was younger, but

he considered that normal. However, Rick told me he could barely sit after these sessions. He talked about how he tried to use his hands to shield the pain until his father started tying his wrists to a bedpost. When I asked Rick if his father said anything during these beatings, Rick explained that he would punctuate each blow with a verbal assault. Rick told me his father made sure he knew just why he deserved such punishment. When I asked if anyone in the house ever came to his aid, Rick admitted that sometimes his father seemed unable to stop the beatings until Rick's screams brought his mother's reluctant intervention. When he got older, Rick said the beatings ended but the verbal assaults did not. Rick didn't consider the verbal assaults abusive because he was no longer being physically beaten, but the bruising just moved from the outside to the inside.

Rick told me that was just the way the old man was. He learned to live with it back then and said he thought he'd put that past behind him. Then the panic attacks started and threatened to undo everything Rick had done to make up for his past. Rick came for help to overcome the panic attacks, not realizing the key to his present problem could only be found in his past.

Diane considered her childhood pretty normal. She wasn't one of the popular kids growing up, she admitted to me, but quickly added that neither were any of her friends. She said she never wanted to be popular, but she wasn't a "bad" kid either. Being bad or popular, Diane said, got you noticed at school, which wasn't good. Getting noticed made you a target, and the last thing Diane wanted at school was to be a target. She got enough of that at home.

Diane confessed she often found herself the focus of her mother's discontent, which could manifest at any time for obscure reasons. Diane was still confused about what would set her mother off. She tried to learn to be compliant, doing what she was told as quickly and as quietly as possible, to try to please her mother. "Flying under the radar" was how she put it. Diane told me, at some point, she gave up on receiving any kind of praise from her

mother. The new standard Diane said she settled for was not to draw her mother's attention.

Diane thought she'd put the past behind her but admitted she was becoming angrier at living her life devoted to drawing no attention to herself. She had already quit two jobs in the past three years because she secretly fumed over how unfairly she'd been treated. Instead of saying anything and drawing attention to herself, she'd just quit. Diane quit those jobs, but she didn't quit thinking about those jobs and how unappreciated she'd been. Well into adulthood, Diane found herself mad, surprisingly furious, with no idea how to handle her rage.

Brent knew his life wasn't normal but did everything he could to hide that fact. Normal people, he said, were happy to see their grandparents. Not Brent. When Brent even looked at his grandfather, he got sick to his stomach and could feel an upwelling of that old, buried anger. Brent was angry that, even after what happened, his grandfather could still show up at the house, smiling and hugging all the grandkids. Brent said he never told his parents what had happened. He just shrugged when I asked him why not. What was he supposed to say? Besides, Brent said it had happened only twice during that summer he'd spent at his grandparents' house in Indiana. He was young and hadn't known what to do to escape. He assured me that when he was older, he made sure it never happened again.

Brent talked about how he went on with his life, distancing himself from his family the older he got. His grandfather got older too. Brent said he found it difficult to reconcile pictures of "that frail old man" with the one who had done those things so long ago. Brent said the way he handled it was just not to think about it, not talk about it. Above all else, he'd learned you don't trust; you don't let people close enough to hurt you. Then Brent started his own family.

Rick, Diane, and Brent all sought to view or present their childhood experiences through that illusion of normalcy. They could

not understand why, with the past in the past, they were having so much difficulty navigating the present. Trying to keep the past pushed down wasn't working so well. Each realized they were trying to fit a "normal" shape around the jagged, hurtful edges of their experiences. Each had attempted over the years to outrun their past, moving on with life, careers, relationships, activities, family—going, doing, running. The past, however, kept seeping up, like thick, sticky tar, gumming up their best intentions in the present.

Childlike Faith

Rick, Diane, and Brent grew up because children do not stay children. As their worlds expanded, they came to realize the "normal" they experienced wasn't really the same as what others had experienced. The strategy of normalcy began to fray. What were they to do then? Stick with the façade of normalcy? Or come to accept a different kind of childhood? How is a person to accept the pain and shame that come from truly acknowledging an abusive childhood?

Everyone knows there is no such thing as a perfect family, but that doesn't stop a child from wanting one. Children have an incredibly powerful need to be loved, and they will hold on to that wish in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary. Why? Because children routinely believe in the impossible, mirrored in and fortified by childhood stories. In Disney's *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket sings that "anything your heart desires will come to you." Lyrics like that and "when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true" promise children the power to change their worlds and do impossible things.

Children are dreamers. They are eternal optimists, as exemplified in the song "Tomorrow" from the musical *Annie*. In that song, an orphan, Annie, has a mantra for getting through difficult

days by singing that the sun will come out tomorrow, while assuring herself that tomorrow is only a day away. Children have the capacity to believe in the sun, even when it is obscured by clouds. I believe this capacity to see clouds today but believe in the sun tomorrow empowers abused children to survive their abuse. The difficulty arises when illusion and truth, with clouds and sun, become confused and the child is no longer willing or able to differentiate one from the other.

In this book, I'm asking you to take a risk by acknowledging the clouds in your life. I'm asking you to open up that lockbox of "it wasn't so bad" and consider the possibility that it was. I'm asking you to open yourself up to accepting that what you experienced as a child was bad because it was wrong and painful. Moreover, I'm asking you to accept the truth, knowing acceptance will cause you more pain. And for those of you who are aware of the clouds you experienced as a child, I'm asking you to reach back, beyond the pain, humiliation, and devastation, to that child who still believed in the sun.

I'm asking you to hold on to faith. The faith I'm asking for, however, isn't found in the pages of a children's book but, rather, in a different sort of book. I'm asking you to reawaken your childlike faith, a faith that starts in childhood yet reaches beyond adulthood. This is the faith, Jesus said, with the power to unlock the kingdom of heaven.¹ I'm asking you to keep your faith in the impossible, even in the glare of reality's harsh light. You may not be able to find the way to impossible things, but "with God all things are possible."²

This book, then, is about the reality of our lives as emotional, relational, and physical beings and how childhood abuse affects that reality. However, this book is also about the truth of our lives as spiritual beings and how faith, hope, and love can make impossible dreams come true.