

Overcoming Isolation

This article contains information included in Chapter Seven, "Isolation", from *Mending the Soul Workbook for Men and Women*, Second Edition, by Celestia G. Tracy, published by Mending the Soul Ministries, Inc., Phoenix, Arizona in 2015. The article will explore the root causes of isolation common to abuse survivors, and ways the survivor can learn to overcome isolation and develop healthy relationships. It was written by Dan Hitz, director of Reconciliation Ministries of Michigan, Inc. More articles on abuse recovery are available at www.recmin.org/newsletter-archives/.



From the very beginning of Scripture we see that “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Even though Adam walked with God in the cool of the day, God still created another human for Adam to share life with. It is interesting to note that God places such an importance on fellowship that He created another human for Adam even though He knew that both humans were imperfect. God knew beforehand that the weight of Adam and Eve’s sin would require the sacrificial death of His own Son. God also knew that His imperfect creation would walk out His plan of salvation *together* and overcome sin. Although we

will all be wounded by humans at some point in our lives, God’s restoration empowers us to receiving healing from humans. Love and fellowship was so important to Jesus that He issued a new commandment to His disciples to love one another, and show the world that they are His disciples through that love (John 13:34-36).

Since living together in unity is so important to God, it is no wonder that the enemy of our souls attacks it with such venom. We who have survived the devastating effects of abuse are well aware of the pain and dangers of living life connected to others. Although we are created for love and fellowship, many of us would rather hide in the darkness of isolation than risk vulnerability in relationship. We may not have consciously decided to build huge walls around our hearts, but many of us have constructed emotional walls so thick they rival medieval castles. We may be forced to interact with others on occasion, but we are secretly bound and determined to *“never let anyone get close enough to hurt us again”*. Even though our childhood abusers may be long gone, the emotional walls remain and hamper us well into our adulthood.

The effect of these walls was made real to me just a few weeks ago when I attended an extended family reunion. It included first and second cousins and their kids. I was sexually abused by my mother while I was growing up, and this was my mom’s side of the family. She had two sisters who also had their share of emotional challenges, and so did their children. **As I stood back and watched their interaction, I noticed two things. First, some actually seemed to have adapted well and were coping better than others.** They had good marriages and steady jobs. Many others seemed to struggle with multiple marriages, emotional challenges, and had a hard time making ends meet. Others were absent from the gathering due to family squabbles or emotional distress. The emotional weaknesses on my mother’s side of the family have truly taken their toll on many.

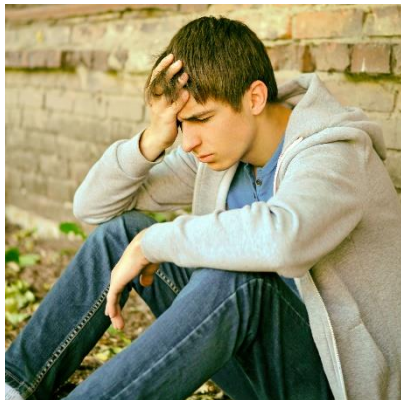
The second thing I noticed is that although many of my relatives present had their share of problems, a good number of them seemed to have the type of relationships that take years and a lot of time to develop. As I stood back watching their interaction, I got the impression that they didn’t just see each other for weddings and funerals. They got together for dinners and family events. **I didn’t have the same type of relationship with my relatives – even my siblings – that many of them seemed to have with each other.** I gained a clearer realization of my own reaction and the effects of abuse – a new understanding of my own deep retreat into emotional isolation. I was rather struck at the contrast of the “little Danny” who played so freely with his cousins during the family reunions my aunt would have almost 50 years ago. He was much different from the guy who stood off to the side

in 2017 while the other cousins grouped up for pictures. In my later high school and college years, I became the “lost child” and retreated deep into the background of life. I left the area as soon as college afforded me the ability to do so, and stayed away as much as I could.

I don't think my story is much different from many of you who have grown up with chronic abuse. No matter what type of abuse we suffer – sexual, physical, emotional, neglect, or spiritual – the effects are pretty much the same. In the past few months we looked at some of these effects; [false guilt and shame](#), [lack of initiative](#), [dysfunctional family dynamics](#), and a wide variety of sexual brokenness. This month we'll look at the issue of isolation, and the importance of overcoming it as we walk towards becoming the person that Jesus created us to be.

In the *Mending the Soul Workbook for Men and Women*, Celestia Tracy identifies three primary root issues as the foundation for isolation – the belief that I am shameful, the belief that I am shattered beyond repair, and the belief that we can trust no one and no one can trust me. Replacing each of these broken beliefs with the truth, is critical to learning to walk out of the emotional hiding place of isolation and developing healthy relationships in the Body of Christ. If you find yourself simultaneously craving healthy relationships and fearing them, you are not alone. You are experiencing what many abuse survivors live with every day. This is where we learn to trust the Lord to teach us how to walk past the fear and develop healthy friendships.

I am shameful. – Toxic shame stems from believe that what we've done, or what's been done to us, was so disgusting that no one could ever love us. It is a belief that we – not only our actions – are more than bad; we are inherently despicable. Abused children often take on the false responsibility for the abuse as a means of trying to make sense of it all. “If I'm such a horrible little boy, it makes sense for my father to beat me.” – or – “I'm such a creepy little pervert, it makes sense for my mother to do these things to me.” The sense of helplessness that comes when we admit that we didn't cause the abuse is far too much for most victims to bear. Assuming that we have caused our abuse also gives us the false hope that we can be perfect enough to stop the abuse. This thinking is futile. Children don't have the resources to stop the abuse. In order to overcome toxic shame, we must place the responsibility for the



abuse squarely on the shoulders of our abuser to whom it belongs. Survivors need to reckon with the reality that the abuse was beyond their control and that they *were* actually helpless back in the day to stop the abuse. The good news is that you are *not* helpless anymore. You don't have to be isolated anymore. You can reach out to safe people for help.

I am shattered beyond repair. – Tracy points out that God intended our needs to be met by safe, loving parents and other caregivers. Abuse shatters our sense of safety and trust. No longer is the world a safe place where my needs are taken care of and adults will teach me how to navigate through life. The world becomes a scary place of hopelessness and despair. This can cause us to emotionally short circuit and fall into helplessness, or to develop an “it's me against the world” mentality. Either extreme is unhealthy and causes us to continue living out of our shattered heart. Broken hearts, with broken motivations, produce broken results that only seem to confirm our brokenness. Healing begins when we admit and accept the terrible things that have happened to us, reach out for help, and learn to grow beyond the devastation. You can learn to live life beyond the borders of your brokenness.

I can't trust anyone and no one can trust me. – Abuse not only shatters our hearts, but it often leads us to draw the conclusion that NO ONE CAN BE TRUSTED! A boy abused by his mother may reach the conclusion that all women are dangerous. A young girl unprotected by her mother who willingly allowed her step-father to abuse her may conclude that both genders are bad. No one is safe.

It's easy to understand why abuse survivors may have a tough time trusting others, but why would they have a tough time trusting themselves? There's actually some very simple reasons why abuse survivors have a hard time trusting themselves. **Remember, we often blame ourselves for the abuse.** Perpetrators are experts at manipulation and the grooming process. It's common for survivors to ask, "How could I have been so stupid as to trust..." We've also assumed the false guilt for the abuse in order to force it to make sense; so therefore, we have a hard time trusting ourselves not to do something again that lets others abuse us.



A more devastating reason that survivors have a hard time trusting themselves is that hurt people, hurt people. Many survivors have responded to the sinful abuse perpetrated against them by sinning against others. A young child sexually abused by a step-parent, may act out the same actions against a younger, more vulnerable cousin. A boy beaten by his father may take out his anger on a younger boy in the neighborhood. This "confirms" that we are just as much an insidious beast as the person who abused us. Yes, a survivor who has acted out on others must take personal responsibility for his own sinful actions, but he can also give himself the grace to realize that

he was acting out of his own pain. If a survivor hasn't acted out sinfully *against* another person, he has usually acted out sinfully *with* another person or *on his own*. Sexual promiscuity, pornography addiction, and substance abuse are common ways survivors try to numb the pain of their own abuse.

The answer for our shattered lives – whether shattered by the sins against us, or by the sins we've committed – is the cross of Jesus Christ. Not only did Jesus pay the penalty for the sins we've committed, He provided for the healing of the wounds inflicted upon us by the sins of others. [Isaiah 53](#) is a beautiful picture of the forgiveness and healing that Jesus provided for us through His death on the cross. He knew what it was like to suffer and be in pain emotionally and physically (53:3). He took our pain and suffering on Himself (53:4). He took the guilt of our sin on Himself (53:6). And He made a way for our own healing by the wounds that He personally suffered (53:5). Truly, Jesus can heal the brokenhearted and free those who are in an emotional prison (Luke 4:18).

Overcoming emotional isolation is a process. It involves some healthy risk taking. And... It involves clinging onto God for help while we learn to recognize who in our lives is safe, and who in our lives is not. **Here are some practical steps to help you learn to walk out of your hiding place and learn to develop some healthy relationships.** The steps don't necessarily go in sequential order, nor do they follow a linear progression. You may find yourself revisiting some of these steps from time to time as God brings a deeper understanding of how abuse has affected you.

First and foremost, we need to ask God for help. This step is so basic that we often miss it. The Lord recognizes that He is asking you to do something that is way out of your comfort zone. He is willing to be the parent that you never had, and teach you how to develop healthy relationships. I have a recovery friend who says, "We are learning to do at 50 what we should have learned when we were twelve." The good news is that God is happy to teach us.

Pray for the Lord to give you a godly mentor. As much as trusting another human to help you overcome isolation may feel like climbing to the top of the Empire State Building to help you overcome the fear of heights, you need the help of safe others in the Body of Christ. A good mentor will understand the challenges you face, and can help guide you through the process. Remember, you are dealing with human mentors here, and even the best Christian mentor will make mistakes from time to time. Don't panic. This is your chance to ask the Lord to help you talk to that other person about the misunderstandings. Unlike your abuser, a mature mentor will listen to your feelings and help work through any challenges that may come. If you're not sure where to find a mentor, start with the pastoral care department of your local church, or contact the leaders of a Christian recovery program.

Walking out of isolation is a process. It's okay to take it slow. Healthy relationships take a long time to develop. Unhealthy connections can happen fast. Ask the Lord to help you grow into healthy relationships at a pace that you can handle. Rather than sharing your whole life story with someone you just met, learn to talk about the basics of life or even the church project that you happen to be working on together. As you share little parts of your heart, watch how the other person handles them. If he or she is faithful with your information, you can share a few more details. Not everyone will develop into a close, personal friend. That's alright. It's good to have close friends that you can share deeply with, and it's good to have friends that you just go get ice cream with. The best friends can do both.

Examine your heart to see if there are any areas where you've isolated yourself from God. If we keep people at arm's length, odds are there are areas of our hearts where we're keeping God at arm's length. We may trust Him for our salvation and ask him for provision, but are we willing to let Him into the areas of our hearts where we have deep wounds? That isn't as easy to do when those we've trusted in the past have betrayed us. We need frequent reminders that God is not like our abuser. He is safe.

Examine your heart and identify issues that you need to repent of. Have you made inner vows like, "I'll NEVER let anyone close enough to hurt me again!" – or – "I'll NEVER be like my abusive mother!" Those vows may have been a reaction to the intense pain that we've endured, but they keep us trapped in the futility of human effort. Inner vows are often made for the right reasons; we need protection, or we don't want to be like those who have hurt us. The problem with inner vows is that they are usually made out of the wrong motivation. They're a kneejerk reaction to our pain. Instead of living bound by an inner vow, it is far better to acknowledge the pain and the offense against us. We can then ask the Lord to keep us safe and to help us live through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Observe the character of the people we are learning to interact with. This may be a bit tricky, because survivors can be hypersensitive to the frailties of others. Everyone carries around a bucket of good and a bucket of bad. As hard as we try to only pour our bucket of good on others, sometimes the bucket of bad splashes out. The important thing is how someone responds when their bucket of bad splashes on others. Do they admit their frailties and apologize, or do they blame others for their mistakes? Safe people acknowledge their errors, apologize, and make corrections.



Learn to trust your discernment. This is another tricky thing for survivors to do. We likely grew up sensing something was amiss in our families but were told that everything was okay. Maybe you were told that you were the problem and that the abuser was the good guy. This teaches us to detach from our discernment and allow others to trample our personal boundaries. It's easy to become hypersensitive when we start learning to pay attention to our discernment, and we'll likely make some mistakes. This is where a good mentor can help.

You're going to make mistakes. Don't give up. Everyone makes mistakes as they learn new skills and take some appropriate risks to step out of their comfort zones. When you mess up; pray, talk to your mentor, and reset. The process gets easier over time. The great thing is that the process even gets more enjoyable over time, and you can develop some great friendships.

I'm still working on this process after many years of recovery. Although the family reunion reminded me that I still have a lot of work to do, I can honestly say that I've met some beautiful people along the way. These friends have blessed my heart in ways that words cannot express. They are dear friends who share a common vision of living for Jesus. These relationships are worth all of the struggles, awkwardness, and goof-ups I've faced through the years. **If the Lord can empower me to walk out of isolation, He can do the same for you. There is a beautiful Body of Christ out there, and you are a wonderful part of it.**