

306. Love After Trauma: Counseling Couples When One Has Survived Sexual Abuse



AACC 2026
Dr. Corey Gilbert
www.HealingLives.com

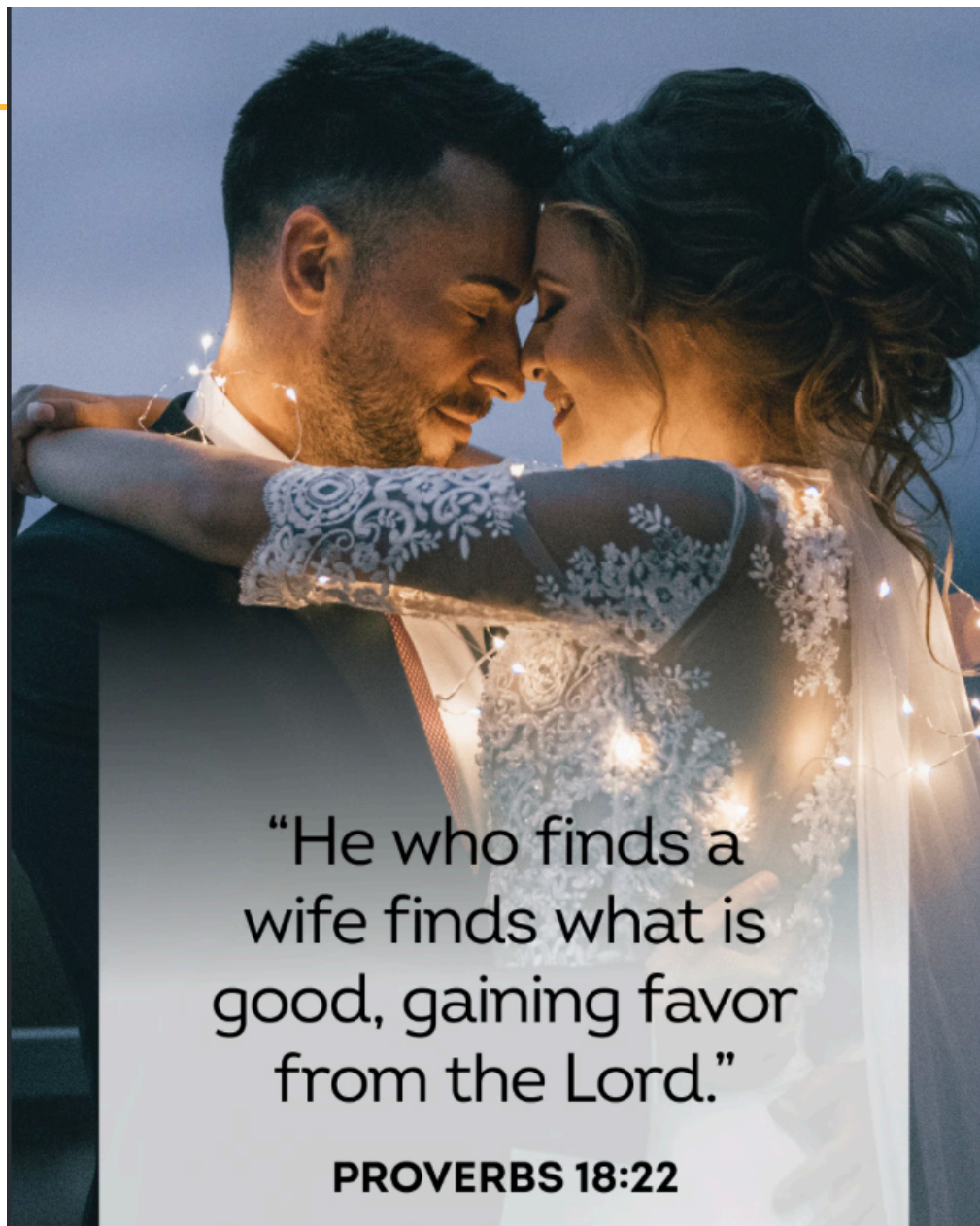




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You are not your past.
But, overcoming its impact is real work







Marriage as a Healing Place

THESIS

By God's design, marriage can be where old wounds are finally safe to surface



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Married Less Than a Year

A COUPLE'S STORY

Separated.

Expecting.

Circling an unspoken wound



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Marriage doesn't create
problems. It reveals them. You
bring unresolved stuff into it.

quotefancy



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Genesis 2:18, 24–25

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.
I will make a helper suitable for him.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife,
and they become one flesh.

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Two people fully known — nothing
to hide, nothing to fear

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here!

Being united with Christ remakes a person's identity.
The past doesn't get the final word

The Landscape:

Understanding the Wound



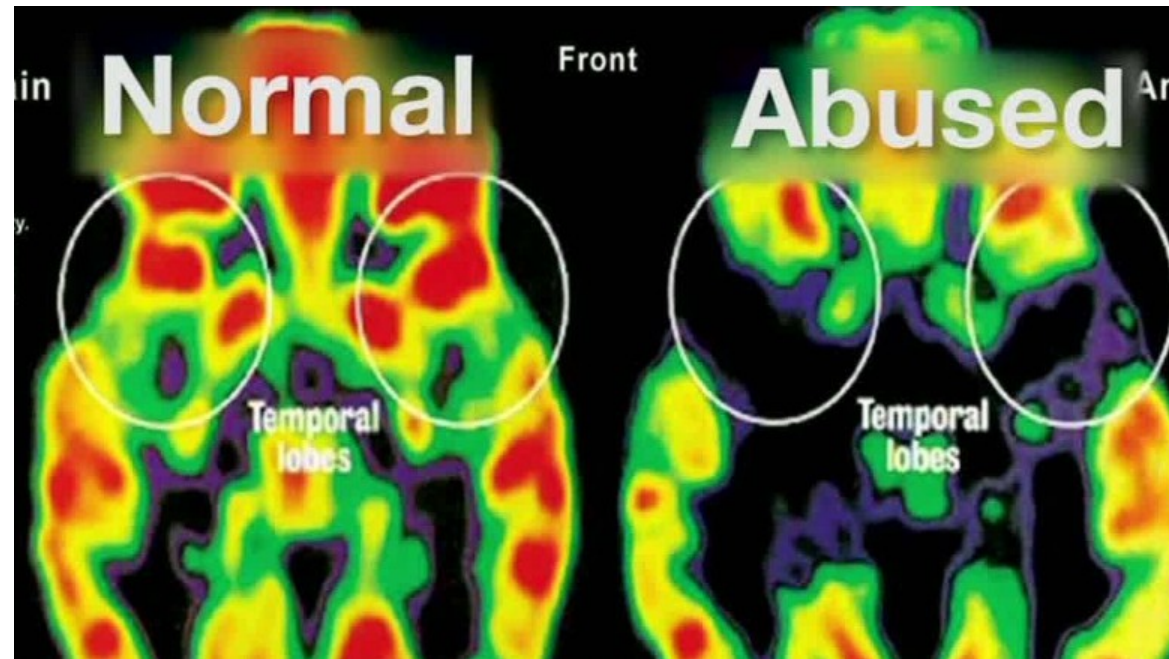
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What Is Sexual Trauma?

DEFINING IT

A sexual behavior inflicted on someone that causes intense fear and stress.



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What Is Sexual Trauma?

DEFINING IT

A sexual behavior inflicted on someone that causes intense fear and stress.

Loss of Trust

In other people. In society.

In one's own body and instincts.



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A sexual behavior inflicted on someone that causes intense fear and stress.

Re-Experiencing

Flashbacks. Intrusive thoughts.
Nightmares.



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What Is Sexual Trauma?

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A sexual behavior inflicted on someone that causes intense fear and stress.

Avoidance

Steering clear of anything
that echoes the trauma.



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Mood & Belief Shifts

Negative beliefs. Reactive moods. Hypervigilance.



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A sexual behavior inflicted on someone that causes intense fear and stress.



Dissociation

Feeling detached, unreal,
or “behind glass.”



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Psalm 34:18

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those
who are crushed in spirit.

God draws especially close to the broken,
not distant from them

Four Domains

THE REACH OF TRAUMA

Body. Story. Attachment. Image of God.



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Body

Arousal, freeze,
dissociation

Story

Shame and self-blame

Attachment

Trust, and patterns of
pursuit or withdrawal

Image of God

How the trauma shapes
what God feels like



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“Felt safety” is not the same as being safe.



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**Trauma is rehearsed
in the nervous
system**

**— and in the
bedroom.**



Freeze

THE BODY'S ALARM

**Freeze is
not agreement.**

A sudden stillness that can look like compliance

“The nervous system does not wait for
permission from the rational mind.”
— Alex Hunter



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“Just move on” usually re-wounds



Where to Start:

Is It Healing? A Return to Normal? Or Rebuilding Anew



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The First Response Matters Most

THE HINGE POINT

How a partner responds shapes everything that follows

Shock, Denial, Disorientation

EARLY STAGES

Followed by initial adjustment

Re-Experiencing to Advocacy

LATER STAGES

Seeking support, integrating the story,
connecting to others



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Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,



Healing has stages — it isn't
meant to be rushed



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The Clinical Stuff — EFT, IFS, & Attachment



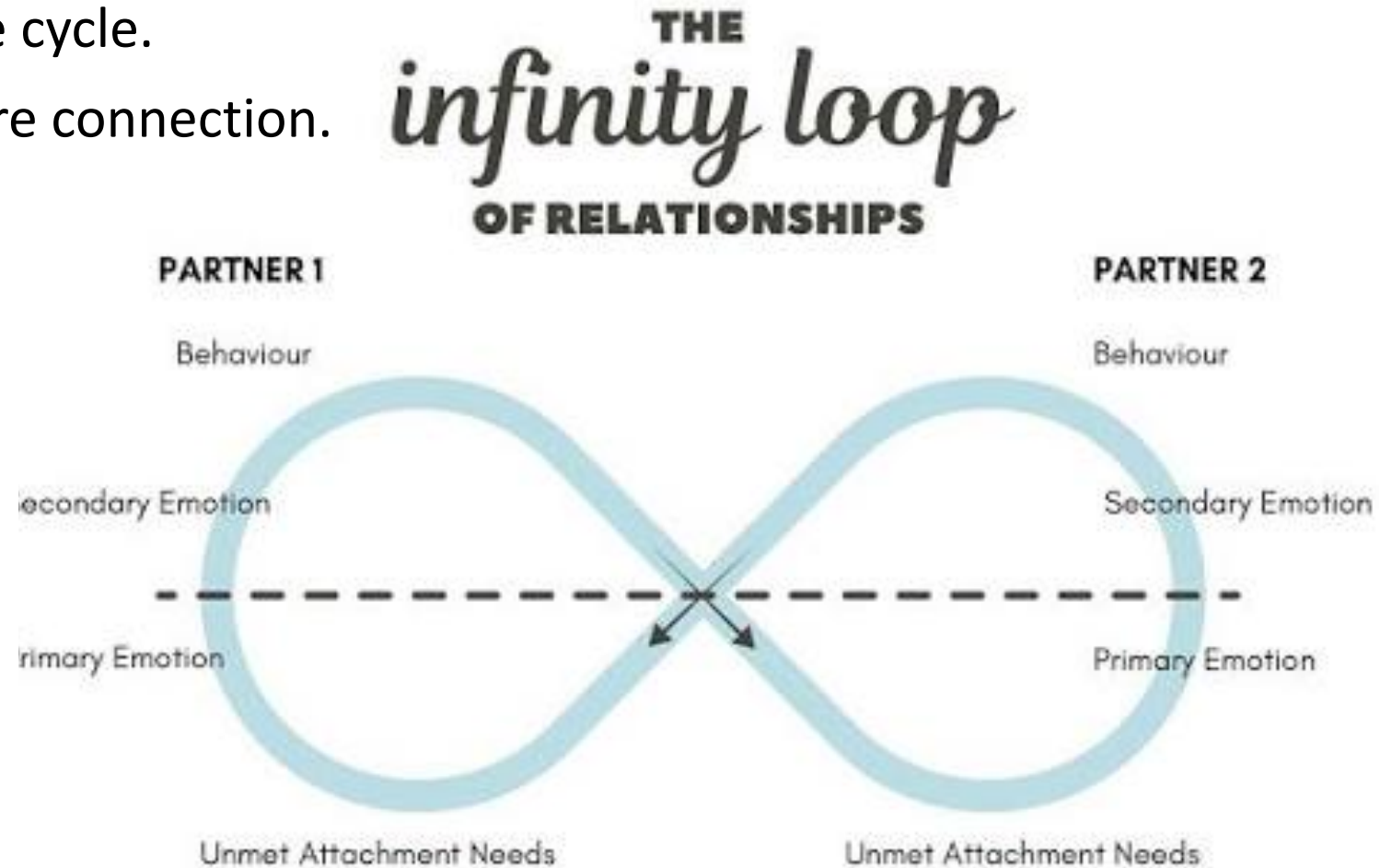
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Emotionally Focused Therapy

THE BACKBONE

Identify the negative cycle.

Replace it with secure connection.



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Emotionally Focused Therapy: Core Tenents: A.R.E.

SECURE LOVE, DEFINED

1. Longing for a felt sense of connection is a **PRIMARY NEED** especially when threatened.
Isolation is inherently traumatizing - primes helplessness.
2. **SAFE HAVEN** connection calms the nervous system - emotional balance. Distress is framed as manageable.
3. Balance confers coherent, articulated **POSITIVE SENSE OF SELF** - congruent expression of needs.
4. Felt sense of **SECURE BASE** primes sense of competence, autonomy - effective dependency.
5. A. R. E. - **Accessible. Responsive. Emotionally Engaged** define the quality of a bond.



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1 John 4:18 (NLT)

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear.

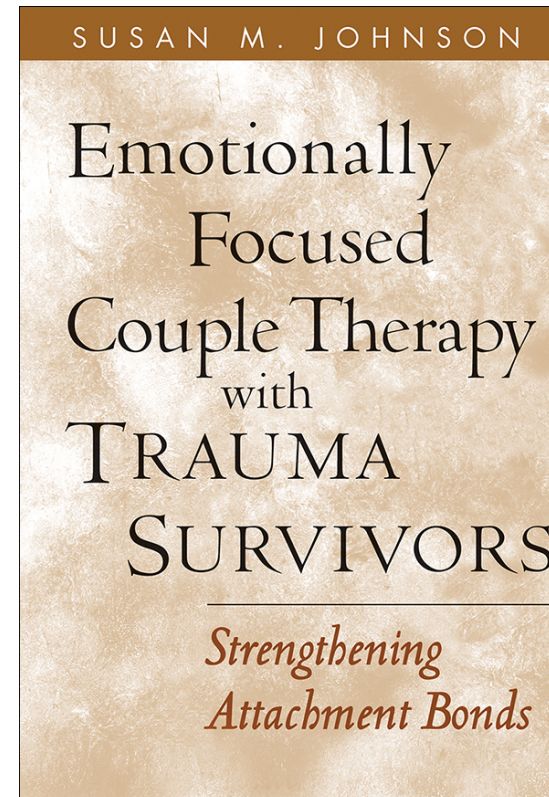
If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment,
and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.

Secure love casts out fear
rather than feeding it

MacIntosh & Johnson (2008)

RESEARCH

EFT works with CSA-survivor couples — with trauma-informed pacing



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Shouldn't She Heal Alone First?

A COMMON DOUBT

Not necessarily — couples work can proceed alongside individual healing



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Four Attachment Styles

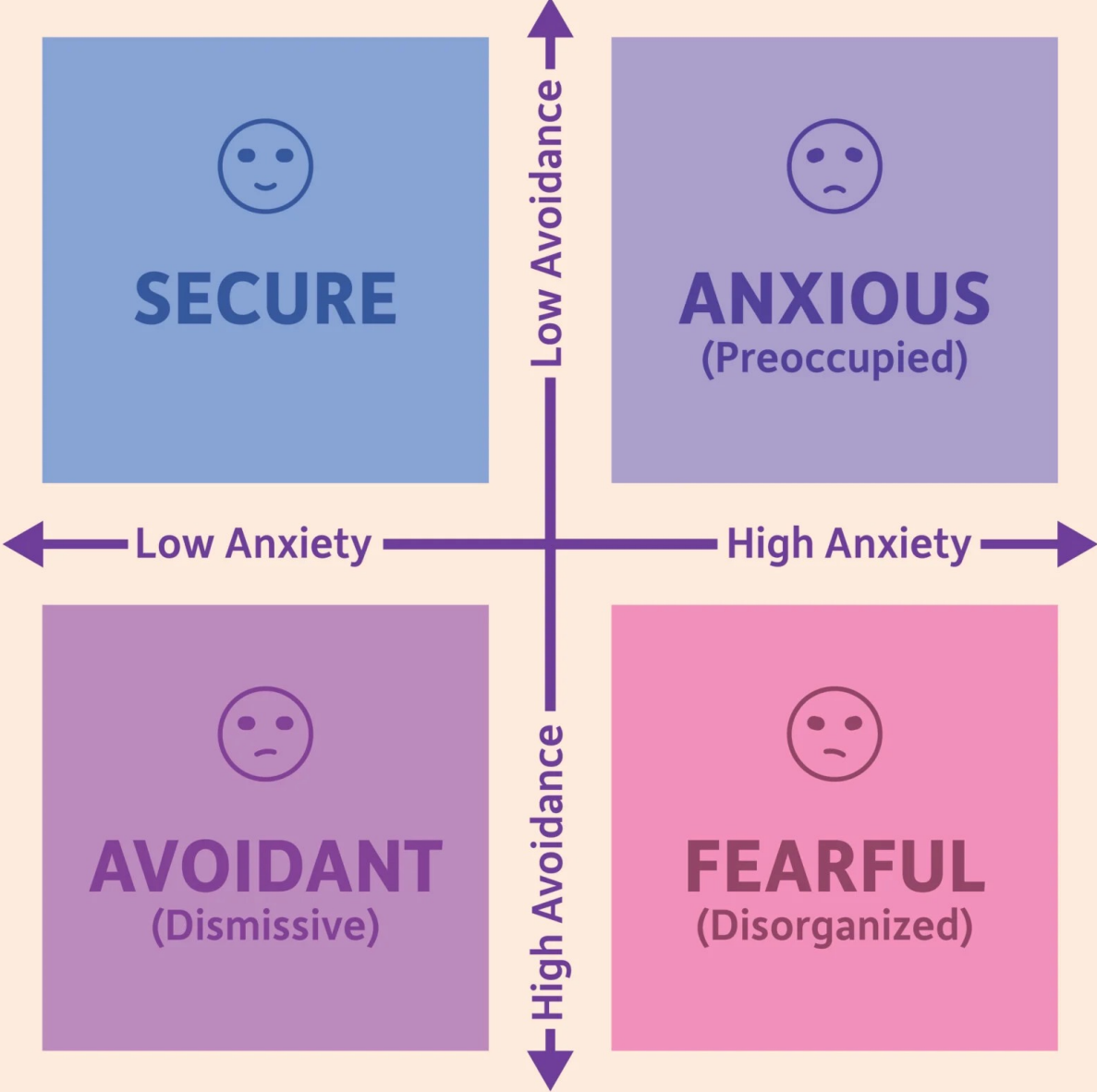
PATTERNS OF CONNECTION

Secure. Avoidant. Anxious. Disorganized.



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ATTACHMENT STYLES



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ATTACHMENT THEORY



SECURE

**SELF-ASSURED,
DIRECT, RESPONSIVE**



PREOCCUPIED

**SELF-DOUBTING,
ANXIOUS, SENSITIVE**



DISMISSIVE

**SELF-RELIANT,
AVOIDANT, DISTANT**



FEARFUL

**SELF-SABOTAGING,
UNPREDICTABLE, ISOLATED**



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Common Emotions



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MANY FEELINGS OF GRIEF

Loneliness

Fear

Sadness

Emptiness

Grief

Numbness

Anger

Guilt

Confusion

WHAT SURVIVORS
FEEL

Anger, fear, grief,
numbness,
avoidance.

Internal Family Systems

PARTS

Core Self

Exiles

Managers

Firefighters

Vulnerable Parts

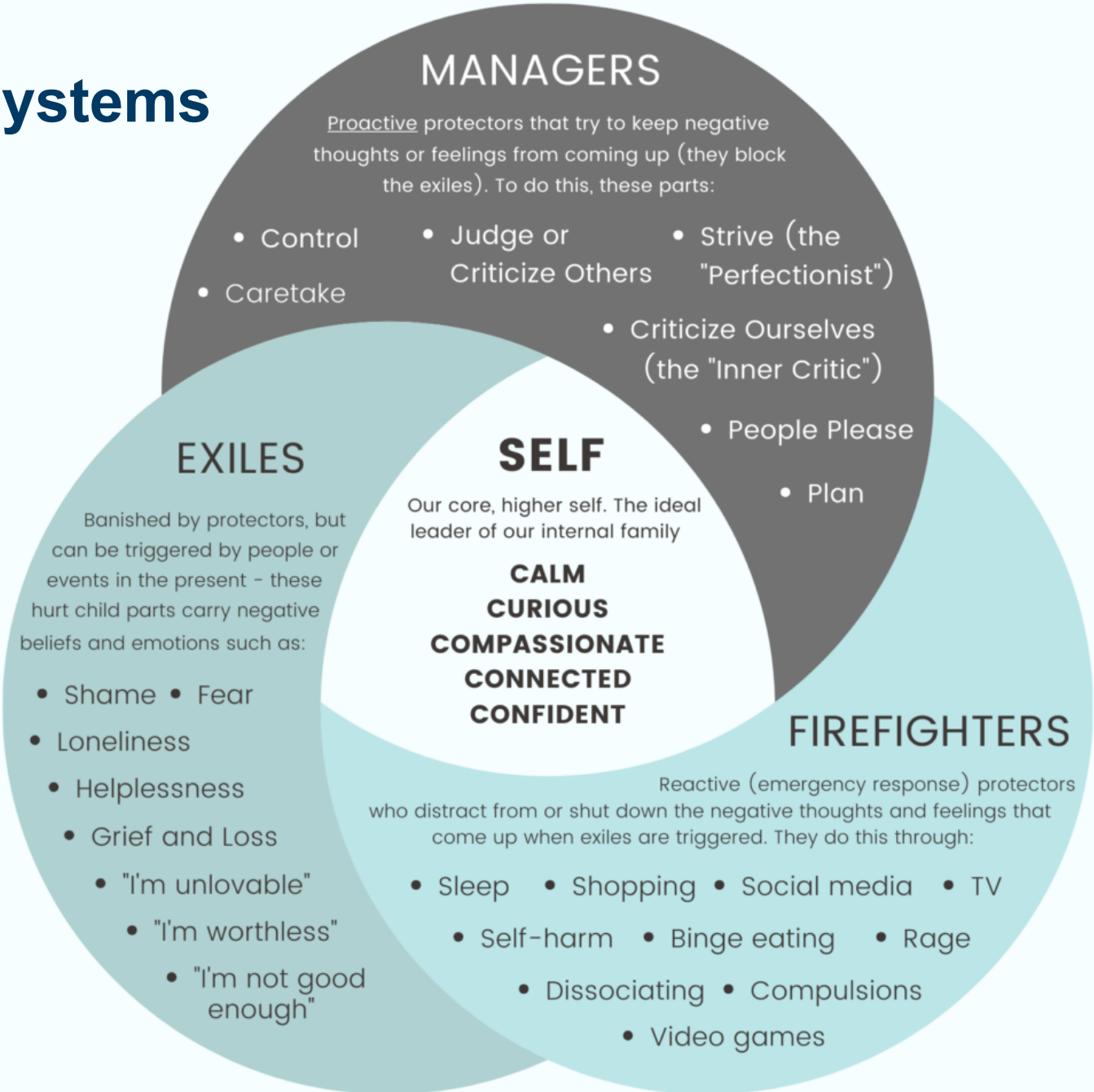
Proactive

Reactive



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Internal Family Systems



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Self-Protection & the Road Forward:

“Thank You for
Trusting Me”



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Coach the response before inviting the story

— never the other way around.”



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“Thank You for Trusting Me”

THE SCRIPT

“I'm not going anywhere.”



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Proverbs 18:13

To answer before listening— that is folly and shame.



Coach the response
before inviting the story

James 1:19

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:
Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow
to become angry,



Presence and patience
come before a response

The Loop

THE PATTERN

Trigger → protective response → meaning-making → escalation



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“She Doesn't Want Me”

WHAT PARTNERS TELL THEMSELVES

“I'm the villain in my own marriage”

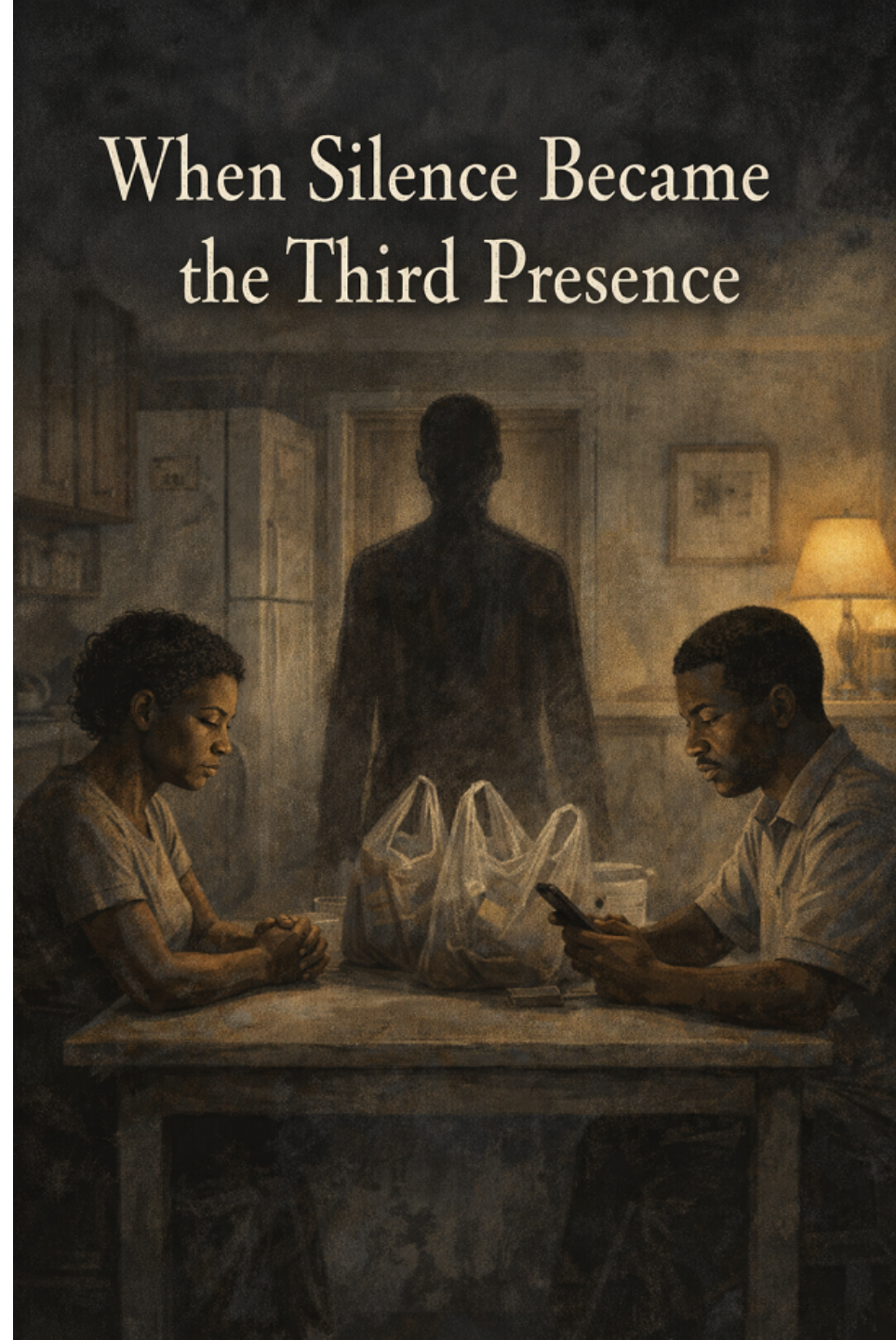


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The Invisible Third Person

A THIRD PRESENCE

Trauma shapes what can
be said — and when



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Response is a hinge point, not a footnote

Unhelpful Responses

WHAT TO AVOID

Rage

Interrogation

Minimizing

Withdrawal



The Partner's Role — Mirroring Christ



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Self-Giving Love

THE CALLING

Power laid down, not exercised



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Ephesians 5:25–30

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her
to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,
and to present her to himself as a radiant church,
without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.
In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself.

After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body,
just as Christ does the church—
for we are members of his body.

Love that lays down power
rather than wielding it

Philippians 2:3–8

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Sacrifice that fulfills the self
rather than erasing it

The Therapist is Not the Savior Either

GUARDRAILS

The partner's own needs still count

*“The partner mirrors Christ,
and the partner is also a limited human
who needs care”*



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The Woman Caught in Adultery

CHRIST'S PATTERN

No condemnation. Dignity restored. (John 8)



The Woman at the Well

CHRIST'S PATTERN

Curiosity, not shame, toward a complicated history (John 4)

The Woman with the Issue of Blood

CHRIST'S PATTERN

Christ stops. He notices. He honors. (Luke 8)

1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy,
it does not boast, it is not proud.

It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking,
it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Patient, non-demanding love —
pairs with pacing intimacy

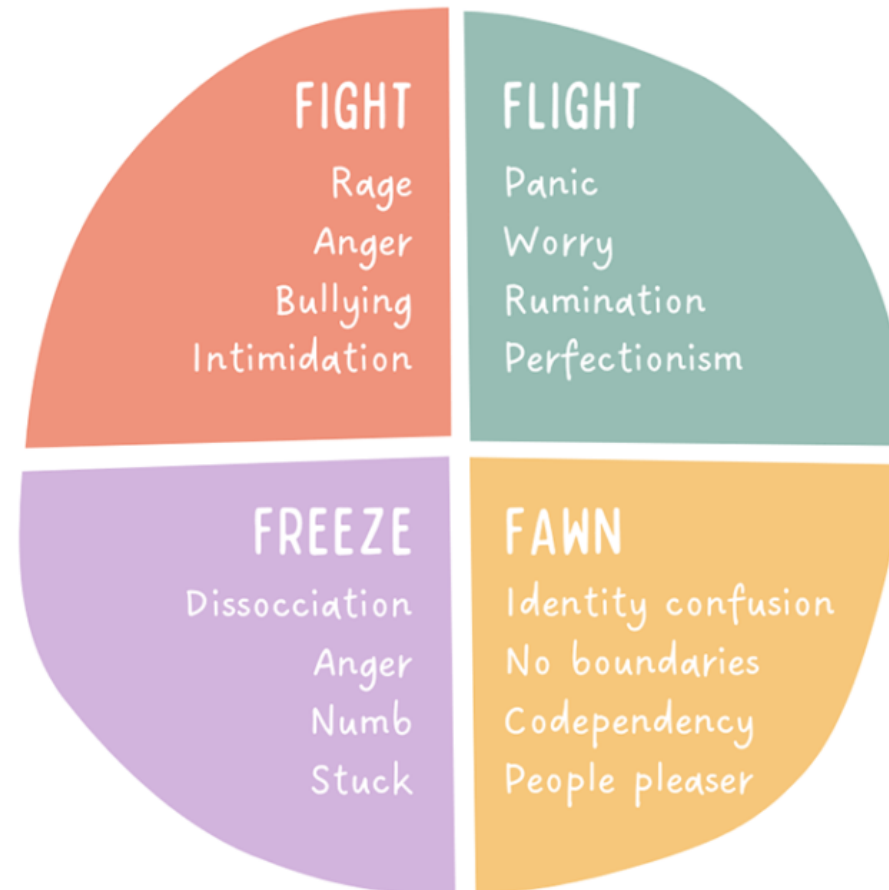


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Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn

READING THE BODY

And two more:
Face,
and Flow



Co-Regulation

A KEY SKILL

Helping someone
find their way
back to calm

Co-Regulation

Co-regulation is when we complete the stress cycle with the support of a safe enough person.

Infants & small children do not have the biological capacity to complete the stress cycle alone. That is built over time through a multitude of co-regulation experiences.



A safe enough person is a person in safe & social mode. They have deep belly breathing, expressive face, soft gaze, calm heart rate, prosodic voice, and the ability to enjoy safe touch or closeness.



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From performance to curiosity



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“What is this like right now for me?”



**Not to fix.
Not to rescue.**

To stay.



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The How: Practical Tools



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1. The First 60 Seconds — Responding to a Disclosure

Purpose: *How to respond in the first minute after a partner discloses something painful or vulnerable.*

Steps

- Slow down. Put down whatever is in your hands. Face them.
- Say: “Thank you for telling me. I believe you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Resist the urge to ask investigative questions, offer solutions, or share your own reaction first — those can come later.

“In the first sixty seconds, the job is presence, not response.”



2. Building a Couple's Trigger Plan

Purpose: *Name triggers before they happen, and turn a triggered moment into information afterward — so reactivity becomes a request rather than a rupture.*



a) Trigger Plan (build together, outside a triggered moment)

- Name 2–3 known triggers together, and describe what a mild, moderate, and intense reaction looks like for the survivor.
- Agree on a pause signal either partner can use in the moment, no explanation required — this can be the same signal as the anytime-stop agreement.
- Decide in advance how you'll reconnect afterward — a specific phrase, a check-in time, a small ritual —

“...so a triggered moment doesn't become a lasting rupture.”

2. Building a Couple's Trigger Plan

b) Trigger-Mapping Worksheet (four columns, filled out individually soon after a trigger, while it's fresh)

- **Cue**: What specifically happened — words, tone, action? Observable, not interpreted.
- **Meaning**: What did it mean to me in the moment? What old story did it activate?
- **Need**: What unmet need sits underneath that meaning (safety, respect, reassurance...)?
- **Request**: One specific, doable ask of my partner that would meet that need next time.
Share the Cue and Request columns first — they're the least reactive
— before Meaning and Need.

Facilitator note: *The goal is a request, not a verdict — steer the Meaning column away from being used as evidence against a partner.*





3. Pacing Intimacy: Non-Demand Touch & Collaborative Consent

Purpose: *A standing consent agreement paired with graded, non-demand touch, so the body can relearn safety and choice. Physical closeness follows trust.*

a) The Anytime-Stop Agreement

- Agree together on one simple word or signal (e.g., “pause,” a raised hand, a tap) that means stop now.
- Both partners say aloud: “I can use this anytime, without explaining, and you'll stop right away.”
- When the signal is used, contact stops immediately — no debate in the moment.
- Follow with a brief, low-pressure check-in only if both want one (“Are you okay? Talk now, or just stop for now?”).
- Revisit the agreement periodically, outside of intimate moments, to reaffirm it still feels safe and clear.

b) Naming Pacing Out Loud

- Practice naming pacing before acting on it: “I'd like to try ___ — is that okay tonight?”
Make this a normal, ongoing conversation, not a one-time negotiation.

“Trust doesn't follow physical closeness.”





3. Pacing Intimacy: Non-Demand Touch & Collaborative Consent



c) The Touch Ladder

- Build a 5–8 step ladder together, ordered least to most (e.g., hand-holding → brief clothed touch → longer embrace → extended non-sexual touch).
Content and order belong to the couple.
- Introduce each step with no expectation attached — a hand held, a hug held longer than usual — and practice one step per session only; no “working up” to more within a session.
- Either partner can use the anytime-stop signal (above) at any point.
- Advance a step only once both partners feel calm and willing at the current one — not just tolerant — usually across more than one session.
- Debrief briefly afterward: what felt okay, what didn't, what to adjust.

Let physical closeness follow trust; trust doesn't follow physical closeness.

4. Covenant Renewal — Breaking Chains, Forging New Ones

Purpose: *A written, co-authored statement naming the inherited patterns this couple is choosing to end and what replaces them — built once, then kept alive as a repeatable ritual.*

a) Building the covenant (first time)

- Each partner separately lists patterns from their family of origin they don't want to repeat (e.g., silence after conflict, contempt, secrecy, control).
- Share lists; agree together on which patterns — the “chains” — this relationship will end.
- For each pattern named, write one paired commitment: **what we do instead.**

*Draft a short covenant statement combining these commitments;
both partners sign and date it.*



4. Covenant Renewal — Breaking Chains, Forging New Ones

b) Renewing the covenant (repeatable ritual)

- Choose a meaningful, low-pressure setting.
- Each partner writes one thing from the old pattern they're releasing, and one commitment for the new pattern they're building.
- Read them aloud to each other. Consider a small physical act to mark it — lighting a candle, exchanging a written note, a renewed vow spoken aloud.
- Revisit on an anniversary or milestone, so it becomes a marker of an ongoing story rather than a one-time event.

Facilitator note: *Keep commitments specific and behavioral (“we call a pause instead of going silent”) rather than abstract (“we’ll communicate better”). Name which commitments are measurable, and track them at the weekly check-in.*



5. Creating a Time-Out Agreement

Purpose: *A pre-negotiated structure for pausing a hard conversation before it escalates. Distinct from the anytime-stop agreement, which is intimacy-specific — this covers everyday conflict.*

Decide together, in advance

- What do we do or say when we need a time-out?
- Is there anything each of us wants the other to know when we take a time-out, even if we can't say it directly in the moment?
- How long will the time-out last?
- How will each of us self-soothe during the time-out?
- What do we do when we return to the discussion afterward?
- How are we establishing or regaining our intimate connection and culture more broadly.



6. Repair Ritual After a Rupture — A Scripted Five-Step Return

Purpose: A predictable, low-improvisation script for reconnecting after conflict or a hurtful moment, used once both partners are calm enough to engage.



The five steps (said by the partner initiating repair, then swapped)

1. **Name it:** “Something happened between us and I want to repair it.”
2. **Own impact:** “Here's the part that was mine” — no “but,” no defense.
3. **Reflect:** the listening partner reflects back what they heard, without adding their own point yet.
4. **Ask:** “What do you need from me right now?”
5. **Reconnect:** a small, pre-agreed gesture that signals “we're okay” — the same gesture every time, so it's recognizable.

Using it

- Begin only once both partners are regulated, not mid-escalation.
- Both partners eventually go through all five steps, even if one initiates.
- Keep to the script's order — resist re-litigating the original conflict.

Facilitator note: *Repetition is the point: the script becomes a groove the couple can find under stress.*

7. The 20-Minute Weekly Check-In — Three Fixed Questions

Purpose: *A short, protected, recurring conversation that keeps connection and repair work from getting lost between sessions.*

Steps

- Same day and time each week, 20 minutes, phones away, no interruptions.
- Each partner answers the same three fixed questions, in turn (don't vary them week to week):
 1. **What felt good between us this week?**
 2. **What was hard, and what do I need from you around it?**
 3. **What's one thing I want more of next week?**
- The listener's job is to reflect back, not defend or problem-solve in the moment.
- Stop at 20 minutes even if unfinished — carry anything unresolved to next week or to a session.



8. Creating a Vision for a Healthy Sex Life

Purpose: *Build a shared, forward-looking picture of intimacy, rather than only repairing what's broken.*

Steps

- Talk about **scheduling** sex and intimacy — deciding together rather than leaving it to spontaneity or default patterns.
- Map turn-ons and turn-offs together (brakes & accelerators)



Joel 2:25

“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten”



What was lost is
not lost forever

Revelation 21:5

He who was seated on the throne said,

“I am making everything new!”

Then he said,

“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

God is renewing everything,
without exception

Romans 8:38–39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,
neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,
neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Not the past, and not what it
takes to heal from it

It is wildly possible.

“God, in His design of marriage, created it as a healing place.”



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God designed marriage as

a

healing place



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The Healing Marriage Intensive

7 Parts

Starts with Your Goals

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Work

Relationship with God

Purpose



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