Reclaiming What Was Lost

A Woman's Guide to Healing Childhood Sexual Trauma Using Parts Work Therapy, Somatic Techniques, and Polyvagal Principles

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For all women who carry a story.

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Introduction

When we talk about childhood sexual abuse (CSA), we recognize the pain, fear, confusion, and betrayal—and we marvel at the ways these can continue to echo for years or even decades later. This isn't terribly surprising. In fact, it makes complete sense. Because CSA can change everything—including how your brain and nervous system function long after the abuse.

However, this is only half of the story. While your brain was being forced to rewire to get through it, the abuse was *also taking* something profound. You see, every child is born deeply lovable. You are inherently whole and naturally deserving. And coming to know this truth during childhood creates a vital foundation for a healthy adulthood. But this is something CSA can seriously erode—especially if you had nowhere else to turn. Therefore, getting through such trauma, especially during childhood, really is nothing short of monumental…

And so is the work you can now offer yourself as you begin to reclaim what was lost.

The Double Wound of CSA

There's an experiment from the world of brain science that's always fascinated me. And it's one I routinely share with women working through CSA.

In this study, researchers Blakemore and Cooper (1970) wanted to explore if the brain has *critical periods of learning*—specific periods in neuro-development when certain experiences are needed to "wire up" certain abilities.

To explore this question, the team did something bold. They lovingly raised kittens in an environment with only vertical lines. Nothing horizontal—not on the walls, not on the furniture, not even in the architecture of the room. During that period of visual development, the only lines the kittens experienced were tall, thin, and vertical.

The results? When the experiment ended and the kittens were moved to a normal setting, their brains could register everything—except horizontal lines! The horizontal patterns were absolutely there; they were an undeniable part of the kittens' outer world. But because their brains didn't experience horizontal lines during the critical period that mattered, for them, it was as if these lines now didn't exist at all. The kittens' ability to see and experience this part of their reality was offline.

Why should research about kittens' neuro-visual development matter to survivors of CSA? Because in a tragically beautiful way, this study mirrors something so many women know deep down: Growing up in a world where you must cope with abuse means you'll *also* miss learning to see vital truths about yourself—truths that are needed throughout life, including:

- You always deserve to be safe and properly loved.
- Your body is sacred and always entitled to protection.
- You have a built-in worthiness simply because you exist.
- You have a unique, real, and enduring core self that is capable and always matters.

Childhood and adolescence are themselves critical periods. Just like kittens need exposure to horizontal lines to experience them later in life, all children need safe and consistent mirroring of their worth to learn to feel *this* as they grow (Ainsworth 1979; Bowlby 1988; Neufeld and Maté 2004; Perry and Szalavitz 2017; Schore 2012; Siegel and Bryson 2011). Without this, a child's sense of herself becomes limited and distorted. Instead of feeling worthy to belong, safely seen, and loved, she grows up feeling different and

unsafe—like she's living in a world made for others, not her. Especially after sexual abuse.

You Did Nothing Wrong

If any of this resonates, here's what I'd also like you to know: None of this was your fault—no matter what. You did nothing to make abuse and neglect happen. And nothing that happened caused you to lose your inherent worthiness in any way. That is the truth. What you needed was not made available (or available enough) by the important people guiding your life. You and your nervous system experienced both trauma and emotional neglect during that critical period of childhood, adolescence, or both. So, the struggles you may have had then, or now, make total and absolute sense.

There's one other crucial thing I'd like you to know (and this is really important even if you're still learning to believe it). What you missed during that critical period of life *is still possible for you*. It is still possible. Not only can your trauma be better processed, but those inherent truths about you and your worth are still there. And they're waiting for you to learn to reclaim them—even all these years later. In fact, reclaiming these essential truths is a vital part of healing, and something so many women still long for.

Respecting Your Parts That Helped You

This book is not a critique of how you've engaged your life, either back then or now. It's not meant to pathologize you or make you feel like a victim. Instead, this book will help you better understand and even respect some important *parts* of yourself inside—parts with specific brain and body functioning that helped you to cope with the trauma and neglect (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006; Schwartz 2021). In fact, these parts

inside—sometimes called ego states (Watkins and Watkins 1997)—may have helped you a lot more than you know. They may have helped you by staying quiet and hidden; alert and on guard; submitting or numb; needful and dependent; critical and controlling; avoidant and checked out, or even frozen and dissociated—vital coping strategies needed during childhood sexual trauma. These were the best (and sometimes only) options you had to manage the abuse and lack of proper support—especially during that vulnerable time of life. That counts for everything! These parts of you did great. The problem is, they might still be showing up in similar ways even though the abuse is now over.

Mislabeling Old Self-Protection Reactions

Too often survivors of CSA carry deep or toxic forms of shame—not just about the trauma they endured, but also about how they responded to it. Even as adults, many women are confused by, or even angry at, the protective mechanisms that activated to help them. And no wonder. These protection reactions and their different coping mechanisms are sometimes mislabeled "symptoms," "disorders," or "problem behaviors." Yet in reality they were only ever normal reactions to incredibly overwhelming childhood experiences (Fisher 2021; Maté and Maté 2022; Schwartz 2021).

This book is about helping you see yourself, and these parts inside of you, differently—not as symptoms of a disorder to be fixed, but as dutiful helpers that got you through it. And even if it's been years or decades since the abuse, these parts of you can still be tended to.

At the same time, this book will help you connect with other important parts of you too—parts that never got to come forward and grow to offer you the things you need for healthy living: greater inner balance, comfortable presence, safer connection, and healthy

control. These parts inside may not have (fully) developed because other parts of you were busy coping with abuse.

Feeling That There's More

Maybe exploring your trauma is pretty new, or maybe you've done some healing work in the past—like journaling, self-help books and informative podcasts, or a little (or a lot) of different therapies. But if you're reading this book, you might still be relying on old ways of coping that you logically know aren't healthy—distrusting others in your life even though they're good people; avoiding things that you know you should more fully explore; repeating unhealthy patterns that negatively impact your life; or still feeling stuck even though you've worked on these issues.

If any of these resonate, they are not signs of brokenness. In fact, as you'll learn, they really make sense. CSA doesn't just affect our thoughts and behaviors. It also creates physiological (body), neurological (brain), and developmental (sense of self) impacts. So, repeating old patterns might simply mean that the trauma still affects you on *these* particular levels. Therefore, you might be seeking more than new insights, conscious behavior change, or different coping strategies (although there will be some of this here for you too). Maybe you're wondering if there's still something more—something that helps on these levels too.

From Coping to Reclaiming

Again, CSA is really about two things: what happened (the trauma you endured and the lack of proper support during and afterward) and the personal growth you didn't get to experience (being properly shown who you truly are beyond trauma and coping).

As such, here's the next question almost every woman asks: How do we begin (or continue) to heal this now? The answer: By pairing

specific grounding and pacing practices with *three* important trauma frameworks.

The Polyvagal Theory

Since the early 2000s, the polyvagal theory (PVT) has helped us better understand trauma—and more effective ways to heal it (Porges 2011; Dana 2018). The PVT and its science show us two important things: how trauma changes our brain and nervous system functioning especially during childhood, and how our survival reactions during the trauma can continue to echo years later. It highlights what can get stuck after trauma, and guides particular methods that can help better heal this.

The Structural Dissociation Model of Childhood Trauma

The structural dissociation model (SDM) is a fancy name for a simple but powerful trauma framework: When a child endures sexual abuse—while also missing proper support—her brain and nervous system must significantly alter to cope with trauma's aftermath (Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022; Porges 2011; Schore 2003; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). In other words, her brain and nervous system can now over-activate something called *protector parts*—defensive parts of herself inside with their own specific brain and nervous system activity (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006; Schwartz 2021). Although we all have these vital parts of self, after CSA they can become an issue.

Because childhood is a time of complex brain development, an overuse of protection responses can begin to imprint. As the child's nervous system becomes preoccupied with danger, her protector parts and their behaviors can remain highly activated (Fisher 2017; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schwartz 2021). In other words, self-protection becomes her default response, while the growth of her

regulated self-parts is overshadowed (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021). Ultimately, the child develops a *personality of overprotection* with a limited repertoire of other responses to life. This is why the SDM and parts work therapy matter—they work with the wounded parts of self still lost in abuse.

There are three different categories of self-parts we'll be working with throughout this book:

- *Protector parts* that activate defensive responses to cope, reduce harm, and help us survive
- *Child parts* that hold our raw fear, hurt, and overwhelm, while also holding our unmet needs, wishes, and hopes
- *Adult and core self parts* that help us experience life with healthier balance and skills, wisdom and insight, safe love and connection, and a sense of purpose and meaning

Somatic Processes and Techniques

While many good therapies work with thoughts and behaviors, after trauma, somatic (body-based) methods are *also* helpful for healing (Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Levine 1997, 2010; van der Kolk 2014). That's because somatic interventions help the nervous system *remobilize*—a vital process to release old trauma patterns still activating in the nervous system (Levine 1997, 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015). These somatic approaches work with trauma responses in ways other therapies often cannot.

In this book, we'll focus on a somatic technique I call SIBAM-ALOW. Although this acronym is new to many women, its process is powerful at remobilizing (even long-held) stuck trauma.

How to Use This Book

The approaches, tools, stories, and techniques in this book are about reclaiming your mobility and truer self. And we do this in a way that feels right for you, with a timing that fits for your nervous system. (All names in this book are purely fictitious, and all case histories offered are compilations of stories that I and many other trauma therapists have worked with over the years. No single or specific person is represented in this book other than Baby Brady in the conclusion.)

As well, the neurophysiology presented in the polyvagal theory (PVT) chapter has been very simplified to make it more understandable—even as this theory continues to evolve. Understanding deep intricacies of the brain and nervous system are not necessary to heal; however, learning this information conceptually can really help you on your journey.

With all this in mind, if there are any sections or exercises in this book that feel overwhelming or triggering, you are welcome to skip them, return to them later, or refer to the publisher's website at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132 for supportive additions.

Allow me to say…

I am glad you are here.

We will do this together.

I welcome you to this journey…

PART 1

Preparation and New Information

Chapter 1

Understanding Childhood Sexual Abuse

If you've endured CSA, it can feel like a scar that never fades. You might struggle with memories, difficult emotions, or a sense of yourself that still feels confusing or fragile. Although tough, these struggles are very normal responses to something that never should have happened to you. CSA doesn't just take away your safety—it can reshape how you experience yourself and the world.

This chapter will help you to better understand CSA, normalize its effects, and highlight what might still need healing. (Please take your time with this information. In fact, if this feels like a lot, you're welcome to skip this chapter altogether or until a time that feels more comfortable to you).

What Is CSA?

CSA happens when someone breaches your boundaries in a sexualized way while you're still a child or teenager—infancy to age eighteen years (Courtois 2010; Finkelhor 2009; Herman 1992; van der Kolk 2014). CSA isn't only about physical acts. It's any behavior that makes you feel unsafe, used, or a little or a lot uncomfortable. CSA always involves a power imbalance—whether through age, size, authority, or emotional influence. The sexual behavior is never mutual; it is imposed on the child for the gratification of the abuser (Briere and Elliott 2003; Kellogg 2009). And it always carries layers

of secrecy and threats, manipulation, or exploitation—whether subtle or overt.

A key thing to understand is that CSA is never the child's fault. Never. The responsibility always lies with the abuser—even if they were (or are) known to you, related to you, or you care(d) about each other in some way.

Sexual abuse can happen in different ways. Some children endure more than one kind of abuse, while others might not recognize their abuse because it didn't involve physical contact. Because there can be confusion about this, let's explore different types of CSA.

Physical Sexual Abuse

CSA and incest can involve physical contact that can leave deep marks—not only on the body but on the mind and nervous system. This can include:

Touching or fondling. An abuser might touch a child's private areas like her genitals or breasts, either over or under her clothing. Sometimes, the child is also pressured to hold or touch the abuser. This could also involve touching nonsexual parts of the body in ways that feel uncomfortable or inappropriate.

Forcing or pressuring a child into sexual acts. This can involve making the child watch or participate in removing clothing, dressing inappropriately, or moving the body in sexualized ways. It could also include unwanted kissing, sexual fondling, or explicit acts like oral sex.

Penetration. This can include any vaginal, anal, or oral penetration, whether with fingers, objects, or genitals.

Rape and date rape. Sexual assault and rape occur through force, strong coercion, or incapacitating methods (drugs, alcohol, or date rape drugs) where consent is not explicitly offered or legal.

Psychological Sexual Abuse and Emotional Incest

Psychological sexual abuse or incest may not involve physical touch. But it can create deep confusion, fear, and betrayal, and cause lasting harm to a child or teenager (Briere and Elliott 1994 2003; Courtois 2010; Finkelhor 2009; Herman 1992). Here, sexually-based behaviors become gradually normalized, grooming the child for further or more intense acts. This kind of abuse creates deep vulnerability in the child while breaking down her sense of safe and healthy boundaries. This can include:

Exposure to pornography. An abuser shows the child sexual videos or nude images of himself or others, often claiming it is for education or entertainment.

Sexualized conversations. The abuser might bring up sexual topics that are inappropriate, ask intrusive questions about the child's body, or use sexual language to see how the child reacts. The abuser may talk about his own sexual experiences, or those of others including people the child knows.

Forcing a child to watch sexual acts. An abuser might expose a child to live or recorded sexual activity, sometimes including their own actions, or images of other adults, children, or people the child knows.

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation happens when someone uses their power, control, or subtle or overt manipulation to take advantage of a child. This can be for sexual purposes or to create some gain for themself or others (Briere and Elliott 1994, 2003; Herman 1992). This increases a child's vulnerability and can eventually create dependency on the abuser. This can include:

Recording acts of abuse. An abuser might force a child to participate in sexual acts that are photographed or videotaped. These recordings are then shared or distributed, adding another layer of harm and exploitation.

Exchanging sexual acts for goods or privileges. An abuser might manipulate a child into performing sexual acts in exchange for things like food, clothing, gifts, money, shelter, or needed emotional attention.

Child trafficking. A child might be isolated and exploited for sexual purposes, often under the pretense of an adventure or job opportunity. This is usually paired with physical and psychological manipulation, coercion, and violence, making it hard for the child to escape.

Ritualized sexual abuse within cults or groups. Some groups or cults use sexual abuse of children (and their adults) as initiation for membership. Sexual abuse is used to strip boundaries or power from members, while claiming the abuse will bring belonging, deeper connection, or spiritual enlightenment (Noblitt and Noblitt 2014; Lalich and Tobias 1994). This form of CSA can also be paired with physical and psychological abuse that is "demanded by a higher power." These experiences leave the child, and often her adults, deeply confused, afraid, and unable to separate truth from calculated lies and manipulation (Herman 1992; Lalich and Tobias 1994; Salter 2012; Scott 2001).

Childhood vs. Adult Sexual Trauma

Sexual abuse is especially harmful during the critical period of childhood and adolescence. That's because it takes advantage of a child's natural immaturity, vulnerability, and trust in authority (Briere 2006; Courtois 2010; Freyd 1996, 1999; Herman 1992; Schore 2003, 2012). Childhood is that critical period when we learn healthy love,

protection, emotional safety, and care based on how our important people treat us. Children look to their adults and older peers for steady protection, respect, and proper guidance. So, when a child's trust is betrayed through sexual abuse, it can turn her development upside down. This kind of betrayal impacts her developing nervous system, causing harm in lasting ways (Herman 1992; Fisher 2017; Schore 2003; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014)

Impacts of Childhood Sexual Abuse

If you've experienced CSA, you might notice its overt and subtle impacts on your psychological growth. Some common and very understandable struggles can include:

Difficulty managing emotions and reactions. Navigating life can start to feel routinely overwhelming both during and after sexual abuse. Because CSA affects emotional regulation, feeling balance, self-trust, and healthy control can be difficult. Even typical daily activities can trigger anxiety, frustration, avoidance, or disconnection.

Challenges with trust and boundaries. CSA can make it really difficult to trust or build healthy relationships with others—or even yourself. You might feel unsure about what behaviors are appropriate or what boundaries you get to set with others. You might also wonder if there are actually good people capable of safe and proper love. As a result, commitment issues, frequent insecurity or conflict, or codependent patterns can begin to develop.

Struggling to fully understand and articulate the abuse. Because CSA can affect how memories are stored in the brain, abuse experiences can encode as fragments without context. Therefore, you might experience only pieces of a memory that feel random, disconnected, or deeply confusing (Fisher 2017; Lanius et al. 2015; Levine 2010; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014).

This can include felt body memories, visual flashes, or unexplained sensations. Here, you might start second-guessing your memories, worrying you "just made up the abuse." This can cause you to minimize the trauma or begin to blame yourself for what happened (Briere 2006; Courtois 2010; Engel 2006; Freyd 1996, 1999; Lanius, Paulsen, and Corrigan 2014).

Feelings of shame and self-doubt. Even when you know the abuse wasn't your fault, a sense of deep shame can still feel embedded. Because CSA happens when your personality is forming, the resulting shame can start to feel like an identity (Briere 2006; Courtois 2010; Fisher 2017; Herman 1992). This can manifest as feeling bad or defective, with feelings of chronic emptiness or self-loathing. This is called *toxic shame*—a form of shame that says "I am bad" instead of the more accurate "Something bad happened to me" (Bradshaw 1988; Courtois 2010; Engel 2002; Fisher 2017; van der Kolk 2014).

Difficulty getting beyond survival mode. CSA can force a child's nervous system into always expecting abuse or betrayal. As this embeds into the child's way of being, her adulthood can involve difficulty relaxing, limited curiosity, a lot of distrust, or discomfort spending time with others or being alone. Experiencing even small joys can feel unfamiliar, or a need for excitement or chaos can develop.

Feeling isolated and alone. The intense secrecy surrounding CSA is designed to make the child feel isolated and helpless (Carnes 1997; Herman 1992; van der Kolk 2014). As an adult, feeling powerless, deeply lonely, or overly private can become a way of life.

Confusion over how your brain and body responded. CSA isn't just what's done to the child—it's also about what she had to do to get through it. Children are not equipped to fight back or escape easily. So, to cope, young nervous systems often rely on intense forms of self-protection: submitting, complying, freezing,

or shutting down. These are not choices; they are *automatic (nervous system) reactions* beyond a child's conscious control (Fisher 2017; Herman 1992; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). But without this understanding, survivors may believe that the abuse was something they somehow allowed. This confusion can deepen when sexual sensation or wanted or needed attention bring pleasure. Although these reactions are normal and common, they can really confuse the child, and normalize the abuse.

Although CSA is always complex, here is the truth for every child: Even if it "didn't feel that bad," even if you froze or submitted, even if there were moments when it felt okay or even "good," this does not change what is widely accepted: You were a child. You were too young to consent. Childhood is never meant to be sexualized. Period.

Sexual Contact with Other Children

Women sometimes have questions about their childhood sexual experiences with other children. These women ask about the difference between normal childhood sexual play versus CSA by another child. While this topic is beyond the scope of this book, it can help to know some important facts: Sexual exploration between children of similar ages is a common and normal part of development (Gil and Johnson 1993; Johnson 2010). However, sexual behaviours involving fear, confusion, coercion, or significant age difference can be indicators of abuse (Courtois 2010; Friedrich 2007; Shaw 2000). CSA is also valid when true consent or general play is not a part of this exploration. If you have questions about these types of experiences, it's important (and okay) to bring these to a qualified professional.

CSA: Why You?

Most abusers don't randomly or suddenly hurt children. It is much more intentional, planned, and calculated (Bennett, O'Donohue, and Linthicum 2014; Elliott, Beech, and Grubin 2010).

It is vital to understand that you didn't choose the abuse. You also didn't create the conditions for it to happen or continue. No child does. Although it's natural to want to feel in control of hard things—or even protect a person you thought cared about you—CSA is very complex and always the responsibility of the abuser.

Grooming

The *grooming* process is a critical part of sexually abusing a child. It's how abusers slowly break down the child by building trust and eroding boundaries—all while keeping the abuse normalized and hidden (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006). Although often subtle, the grooming process is strategic, systematic, and always very deliberate. It's a method that exploits a child's natural vulnerability, making resistance very difficult or even impossible (Courtois 2010; Herman 1992; Finkelhor 1984; Salter 2003).

The process of grooming, and its many forms of manipulation, are subtle but incredibly potent. This is especially true when the abuse is concealed in "love," "fun and games," "deep friendship," or "something unique and special."

Here's how the grooming process can look (Bennett, O'Donohue, and Linthicum 2014; Elliott, Beech, and Grubin 2010; Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006):

> **Choosing you.** Abusers target children they see as vulnerable. Vulnerability doesn't mean weakness—it means the child may be more introverted, trusting, compliant, accessible, or without attentive parents. Abusers look for opportunities to gain a child's loyalty and then ensure the abuse stays hidden. This is never the fault of the child. It is all about opportunity for the abuser.

Building trust. Abusers know they can't immediately harm a child—they need to break down her natural defenses first. Initially, the abuser can seem innocent, kind, caring, and even quite protective. Although this behavior is never genuine, it can feel this way and gains the child's trust.

Fulfilling needs. The abuser focuses on meeting the child's needs to solidify a compelling hold over her. This can include affection, special attention, favoritism, gifts, or some form of help or rescue she needs. The abuser might even step in as a caretaking figure when the child feels neglected, lost, or alone.

Isolation. Over time, the abuser works hard to create distance between the child and the people who could help and protect her—parents, siblings, friends, or teachers. Abusers accomplish this through physical isolation and creating a lot of alone time together. This can also involve emotional isolation, so the child feels understood by only the abuser.

Blurring boundaries. Abusers ensure they cross sexual boundaries slowly to make their behavior seem natural and normal. This can begin with actions that appear innocent: shoulder squeezes, gentle massages, images of partially clothed bodies, or even some light drug or alcohol use. Once normalized, these acts then gradually escalate, making it hard for the child to see them as abnormal.

Maintaining control. Once more intense sexual abuse begins, abusers work hard to keep it a secret. They use both subtle and overt forms of fear, guilt, and threats to silence the child or her concerns. Abusers can make the child feel complicit in the abuse, convincing her harsh consequences could apply to her too. And although abuse is *never* a child's responsibility, this argument can feel powerful if other children were involved (Finkelhor 1984; Freyd 1996, 1999). Abusers are also skilled at threatening meaningful losses: the abuser's "special love,"

someone to really care for the child, her reputation and innocence, or even her or her loved ones' safety.

These are very powerful weapons over a now-confused child, who is still in a developmental stage of innocence. This is why CSA is far too common, and a story so many women (often unknowingly) share.

Naming Common Misbeliefs

Many women who endured CSA still carry beliefs from the abuse. Although the beliefs can still feel ingrained, recognizing them is a step toward healing.

Below is a checklist of common beliefs many women still carry about past CSA.

As you read through it, check any statements that feel (even slightly) true—even if you *logically* know that they are not accurate.

- ☐ The abuse was somehow partially or fully my fault.
- ☐ I should have stopped it. I had that power.
- ☐ I eventually knew it was wrong, but I still didn't stop it or tell. So, I can't be a victim.
- ☐ I didn't fight back, so I must have wanted it.
- ☐ It wasn't real abuse because it didn't involve physical contact.
- ☐ Others had it worse than I did.
- ☐ I was too old to be a victim—I should have known better.
- ☐ I'm damaged because of what happened to me. I'm forever broken.
- ☐ If I tell anyone, they'll think I'm lying or exaggerating.

- ☐ If I tell anyone, they'll just pity me, and I hate pity.
- ☐ I should have healed by now. Others I know seem over it, so why aren't I?
- ☐ People will see me differently if they know the truth.
- ☐ I liked the attention sometimes. Maybe I wanted this to happen. Maybe he felt that too.
- ☐ If you love the abuser, and it felt special, it's not really abuse.
- ☐ I'd be responsible for total chaos in my family if anyone found out. I have to keep the secret, even now.
- ☐ I must have been a weak kid for being chosen. That kind of makes it my fault.
- ☐ I still care about the abuser. It's been a long time. I should leave it alone.
- ☐ Facing it will make things worse, not better.
- ☐ I'll hurt my parents or others in my life if I tell. I don't want to be responsible for that.
- ☐ He was a troubled guy, so it's not like he meant to abuse me.
- ☐ No one can ever truly love me if they know what I went through.
- ☐ I was a difficult kid, so I deserved what I got.
- ☐ If I let myself cry or feel angry, I'll lose all control and mess up my life.
- ☐ I'm too sensitive. I'm overreacting to what happened.
- ☐ If the abuser was genuinely kind sometimes, it can't be true abuse.

- ☐ I don't always feel bad about it, so it couldn't have been that impactful.
- ☐ Opening this up will change my life completely. I'll have to go all in on the healing.
- ☐ I have to protect the abuser because people in my life still have a relationship with him.
- ☐ I participated when others were being abused, so I can't be a victim. What if I'm actually an abuser?
- ☐ It only happened a few times, so it wasn't really that bad.
- ☐ I'll have to disclose this to everyone in my life.
- ☐ I'll have to confront my abuser.
- ☐ I'll have to talk about every incident in detail to heal.
- ☐ This was the way he showed love for me. He was too nice to have meant to abuse me.
- ☐ I was such a lonely kid. In a way, he was there for me. This can't be true abuse.
- ☐ People will blame me because I didn't tell.

JOURNAL PROMPT: As you think about all the ways children are groomed for CSA, pause and take a moment to reflect. Do any of those grooming techniques help keep your beliefs active? Are there any beliefs that still feel *especially* potent? If so, that's okay—that's actually really common, even if you're well into adulthood. However, how might these be holding you back now—either in clear or subtle ways?

Trauma Bonding

As we discussed above, grooming is a deliberate and manipulative tactic used by all sexual abusers to manipulate a child. Grooming is designed to gain the trust of the child, and sometimes even the adults in her life. It's a powerful strategy that creates a false sense of caring under the guise of a special relationship. It makes sense that CSA can feel so confusing—because how can such a "kind person" be capable of such calculation? Plus, they don't look or sound like the monsters we expect. It's what makes the grooming process so powerful—and why it can lead to something called *trauma bonding*.

Trauma bonding happens when an abuser switches between harming you and then showing you care (Carnes 1997). This switching creates a complex attachment causing the child to feel more in control than she is (Carnes 1997; Freyd 1996, 1999; Herman 1992). The child comes to feel like a participant in the abuse, believing she has choices—although she does not.

The formation of a trauma bond is *never* the fault of the child. But this type of bonding can become very potent—and it can tie women to the abuser (or the abuse) even years later (Carnes 1997; Fisher 2017; Herman 1992, 2015; van der Kolk 2014).

If any of this resonates, it's important to know: Trauma bonding is a survival mechanism—it helped your mind feel in control through a sense of connection (Briere 2006; Carnes 1997; Herman 2006; Freyd 1999). It says nothing about your character or strength, at all! You were doing the best you could to cope and get through—and your nervous system helped you by trauma bonding.

Why It's Hard to Speak Up

As you can see, children face *a lot* of barriers when it comes to disclosing sexual abuse: their youth and lack of development; limited knowledge of abuse dynamics; powerful and complex grooming tactics; ongoing (overt or very subtle) threats and manipulations; trauma bonding; the resulting fear, shame, and deep confusion all of

this creates; a potential lack of good supports; additional complicating life factors; and even the attention and special feelings the abuse may have offered. CSA can be far more complex than just seeing it coming or telling someone as soon as it happens (Herman 1997; Fisher 2017). And although this can be an uncomfortable truth, it really is all beyond the child's control.

Finally, although our understanding of CSA has developed, our culture doesn't make it easy for survivors to come forward. Fear of stigma, still knowing the abuser, denial of abuse, faulty beliefs, and a lack of good supports can make women decide to go it alone.

Considering CSA Truths

Earlier in the chapter, we explored some common misbeliefs that many women still hold about their abuse. But with this new information—and maybe a growing understanding—you might consider important truths at this stage. Some of the following statements might be easier to accept, while others may still feel tough to reach. That's okay. Healing really is a process, so there's no right or wrong way to engage this exercise.

For each statement below, rate how much you can feel it on a scale of 1 to 5:

1 = Not at all true for me right now

2 = I feel curious about this belief

3 = I feel some truth about this belief for myself

4 = It feels mostly true about me at this stage

5 = It feels completely true for me now

Take your time, and remember, this exercise is about noticing where you are in your healing journey. Try to avoid any self-judgment or self-pressure. And see if you can evaluate these not just from a logical level (i.e., *factually* I believe it), but also from

a *felt-sense* perspective (this actually *feels* true deeper down). You can also notice statements that seem *logically* true but still don't *feel* like truth just yet.

Truths About Childhood Sexual Abuse

- ☐ The abuse was not my fault.
- ☐ I had no real power to stop the abuse. I was a kid with a lot stacked against me—from the abuser and in my life.
- ☐ I didn't deserve what happened to me.
- ☐ Not fighting back didn't mean I wanted the abuse.
- ☐ Each form of sexual abuse I experienced was real, and it impacted me in some (even small) way I'm still trying to understand.
- ☐ I wasn't too old to be a victim of CSA.
- ☐ I am hurt and wounded, but not forever broken and defective.
- ☐ My experience was real and it still matters, even if others won't understand that.
- ☐ I don't need to compare my pain to anyone else's. Pain is pain, and its impact is real.
- ☐ My particular way of healing doesn't have to have a specific or well-planned timeline.
- ☐ Telling my story can be in my own time, in my own way, and with only safe, capable people in my life.
- ☐ It was not my job to protect myself from the abuser then.
- ☐ I did nothing to make the abuse continue, even if my relationship with the abuser continued.
- ☐ Trusting someone who hurt me does not make me at fault.

- ☐ I'm allowed to be impacted by the abuse, no matter how long it's been.
- ☐ The abuser used a lot of tactics to keep me powerless and confused. Even if these still confuse me, that's normal and okay.
- ☐ Caring about my abuser (then or even now) does not erase what he did.
- ☐ While it's hard to admit, I was helpless to the abuser-because I was a child.
- ☐ I can be nervous about healing and what that might bring into my life.
- ☐ I deserved better than I got from the abuser and those around me.
- ☐ I don't have to rescue others from my hurt or anger about the abuse.
- ☐ I was abused because I was in a vulnerable situation and stage of life. It was my circumstances, not something about me, that caused him to abuse me.
- ☐ I can learn how to hold tough feelings about the abuse that I still avoid.
- ☐ Sexual abuse to a child really is big. I'm not being too sensitive or overreacting.
- ☐ My abuser's "good moments" do not erase any of the abuse.
- ☐ Liking the abuser's attention doesn't justify the abuse in any way.
- ☐ Liking the abuser's attention doesn't mean I wanted or kept the sexual abuse going.
- ☐ Feeling pleasure from the abuse doesn't mean there was something wrong with me, or that it wasn't abuse. I'm learning this is normal and common.

- ☐ Healing doesn't make the abuse less real, or let the abuser(s) or others off the hook.
- ☐ Participating in the abuse of other children doesn't mean I'm a perpetrator. That was part of the grooming and manipulating process by the abuser.
- ☐ Not feeling deeply impacted by the abuse doesn't mean it hasn't shaped me in some way.
- ☐ I experienced victimization in my childhood. That's part of my story. I was victimized.
- ☐ There might be struggles in my life now that are because of the sexual abuse I went through.
- ☐ I don't have to process every sexual abuse experience to heal. And I can choose where I start, continue from, or end.
- ☐ I am just as deserving of the empathy I feel for other CSA survivors.
- ☐ I did nothing to seduce the abuser. No healthy or safe adult is seduced by a child in any way.

It's okay if some of these truths feel distant or even impossible right now. Healing takes time and happens in stages. Every small step is a part of the journey, so it's okay to take all the time that you need.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In chapter 3, we'll look at the recent science suggesting how CSA can shape a growing brain and nervous system. This will help you to better understand why you might still be struggling with the effects of abuse.

But before we do that, in chapter 2, we're going to talk about the importance of grounding and pacing. These practices are vital to your healing process, and will help yougrow some foundation for the work of later chapters.

Key Points

- CSA is a violation of sexual boundaries during the critical years of infancy to eighteen years old. It always involves an abuse of power and is never the child's fault. CSA can take different forms including physical, psychological, emotional incest, exploitation, trafficking, or ritualized abuse.
- CSA can have lasting nervous system impacts even if there was no physical contact. Some of these include difficulties with trust (yourself and others), healthy boundaries, frequent emotional overwhelm, toxic shame, isolation, needing excitement, fragmented memories, and living in coping or survival mode.
- Grooming is a subtle, deliberate, and highly manipulative process. It helps abusers gain trust, break down defenses, and keep the abuse hidden. Trauma bonding makes survivors feel attached to, and even protective of, the person who is abusing them.
- Healing begins by considering CSA truths: The abuse was never your fault, you were too young to consent, and your complex reactions were completely understandable and normal.

Chapter 2

Developing Your Grounding and Pacing

Rita's Story

Rita was struggling. She felt like everything in her life was either a race or a crawl. Her mind would often speed with thoughts of to-dos, constant worries about everything, and resentments toward others. Her partner would comment on Rita's loud way of walking, fast style of talking, and frequent fumbling with tasks. By the end of each week, Rita would finally collapse—she'd zone out, "not give a shit," and drink wine to shut off. Rita wondered if this up-and-down pattern, now her way of life, resulted from her childhood abuse.

Although we'll explore the impact of CSA in chapter 3—especially how inescapable trauma reshapes a child's nervous system—there is one idea to keep in mind as you read this chapter: After CSA, especially if proper support was limited or absent, the nervous system can shift into a state of *imbalance*. In other words, for many, life begins to feel too fast or too slow, too overwhelming or shut down, or too much or not enough. This is the nature of trauma.

It's important to know that these inner experiences are not personality traits, flaws, or signs of brokenness—at all! They are the natural, long-term effects of a body and mind that had to cope with something no child should endure. Therefore, when safety, comfort, or protection are missing, the nervous system must learn to quickly

adapt! These adaptations can last well into adulthood, making your (inner and outer) world feel chronically imbalanced.

In this chapter, we begin the work of bringing a little more steadiness into your life. We'll do this using two important practices—the rebalancing offered through *grounding* and *pacing*.

Together, grounding and pacing can help you and your nervous system:

- Feel more anchored, present, and connected to yourself
- Navigate difficult moments with less overwhelm or shut down
- Notice more options for a healthier sense of control
- Move at a rhythm that respects your current limits and healing process

Again, for now, you don't need to understand your nervous system to begin this part of your healing work. You just need to know that your way of moving through life since the CSA makes complete and total sense. And now, there are also ways to soften some of the extremes so you can begin to feel a little more of yourself.

What Are Grounding and Pacing?

What do we mean by *grounding*? Imagine grounding as an anchor that keeps you steady and connected to the present moment. With grounding you'll feel a little safer engaging yourself, your inner world, and others in your life. It will help you feel more open and curious, while also managing the needs of your life. As your grounding skills grow, you'll navigate your thoughts and emotions without them taking over your sense of control. While this doesn't mean everything will always feel calm, you'll better navigate life's challenges and small joys.

What do we mean by *pacing*? Pacing skills help you balance your energy so life doesn't feel too fast or too slow. Because trauma requires

extreme speeds to cope, the nervous system can default to either intensity or shut down. In fact, there's a term for this oscillation between too much and not enough—it's called *biphasic arousal* and it's common after trauma (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Herman 1992; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Rothschild 2000). Therefore, pacing, like grounding, is vital to your healing because it gives you a new rhythm and a growing empowerment.

Grounding and Pacing Exercises

Having a *regular* routine to grow your grounding and pacing is a necessary part of nervous system healing. It's exactly like strengthening a muscle in your body—the more consistently you practice, the stronger it gets. The cool thing is, this isn't just about habit-building—being purposeful with this practice can actually change your brain and nervous system while helping you rebuild and strengthen your inner sense of safety(Doidge 2015; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020). And, because it's a counter-response to the trauma, this practice also lets you reclaim more control.

As you take on these exercises, life will inevitably throw curveballs that will affect the consistency of your practice. So, if you miss a practice session, try not to be hard on yourself. Healing really is a journey with ebbs and flows. The important thing is to return to your routine when you can. Because as the saying goes, the more you put in, the more you get out. As your practice continues, your grounding and pacing will strengthen—and it will begin to feel more available to you.

While there are a number of grounding and pacing exercises, we will be working with five. Some may be familiar; others might be new. Using these (individually or together) can help in tougher situations, while also growing and strengthening your nervous system's regulation. Again, your consistency with these exercises is key.

(Please note, for exercises asking you to scale your experiences: 1 indicates the lowest or least, while 10 indicates the highest or most).

Breathwork

Breathwork is a helpful practice for grounding and pacing because it reminds your nervous system how to slow down. It helps your mind and body reach for more balance, and can even help release trauma from your body (Brulé 2017; Brown and Gerbarg 2012; Dana 2018; Schwarz et al. 2017).

Although there are many varieties of breathwork, we will practice three: *box breathing* to become more present, *fire breathing* to move and release anger and anxiety, and *heart breathing* for self-soothing and compassion. You can adjust each breath to fit your needs, so take your time to experiment with each. (Video examples for many of the exercises in this chapter can be found at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132.)

BOX BREATHING: BALANCING YOUR INSIDE SPEED

When your mind and body feel too fast or too slow, box breathing can bring greater grounding and pacing (Brown and Gerbarg 2012; Divine 2016). Box breathing is a simple and structured breath that can help you slow down or feel a little more present. This breath gets its name by shaping your breath into four balanced parts—like the sides of a box. This gentle pattern can bring more stability without stirring up traumatic material inside.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture, with closed eyes or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence or with music that feels soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice.

Begin your breaths. Inhale slowly through your nose and into your belly for a count of four. Hold your breath for a count of four. Exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of four. Hold again for a count of four.

Repeat. Continue this cycle of breathing for four rounds, or until you begin to develop a nice rhythm. Aim for at least a 7 out of 10 on the comfort scale before moving to the next step.

Notice your body. Once you have a nice cycle of breath, you can move your awareness into your body. Here, you are simply noticing where *too fast* or *too slow* energy seems active inside. For example, you may notice a sensation of butterflies in your stomach; tightness or bracing in your shoulders; speedy thoughts in your head; a buzzing in or around your body; or a sadness, heaviness, or stuckness in your chest. If there are multiple areas, choose just one for now, whichever seems to get your attention.

Send the breath. Now, as you inhale, visualize your box breath gently traveling to this area of your body. Next say to that speed: "I see you. This breath is for you. Please take your time." Repeat this phrase for at least four rounds, allowing the inner speed to experience this breath. During your box breathing, try not to judge, analyze or make anything happen.

Close. Continue until you feel better, your timer sounds, or you're ready to close for just now. You can then journal about your experience, or any insights you had from the practice.

FIRE BREATHING: RELEASING ANXIETY, ANGER, AND PAIN

Fire breath (Brulé 2017; Schwarz et al. 2017) is a powerful tool for moving and releasing anger, anxiety, tension, and pain. It does this in a way that's slow and controlled, so its process feels well-paced and tolerable. Fire breath helps difficult energy release, bringing you more lightness and presence.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture with closed eyes or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence or with music that feels soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice.

Begin your breaths. Take a deep breath in through your nose. Allow your belly to expand to a degree that feels comfortable. Remember to do this slowly and consciously so you can find a nice rhythm of breath.

Exhale. On the out breath, exhale with a slow and long sound of "ahhhhh." This exhale will come from the *very back of your throat*, making a slow raspy sound as it releases.

Repeat. Take your time and repeat for at least three rounds of breath, again letting the breath find a nice, rhythmic flow.

Notice a sensation. Now, gently scan your body and notice a difficult feeling or sensation you'd like to mobilize today. Bring your awareness to the part of your body where this feeling (tension, anxiety, frustration, anger, or pain) seems to be sitting. On each inhale, pull the breath into that space, then hold for a count of three to five seconds.

Exhale with sound. When you're ready, slowly exhale the breath, imagining some of the feeling leaving along with it. Feel this release through that raspy "ahhhhh" sound—you can even imagine fire, smoke, ash, or heat leaving too (Schwarz et al. 2017). Again, take your time. Go at your own pace.

Track. After three to five rounds of breaths, pause to notice any changes—something in your body that feels better or just different. You don't need to analyze or make anything happen; remember this is just about allowing and observing. You can sit with and enjoy any changes that feel better, or you can continue

fire breaths with what you notice now (either the original sensation or a new version of it).

Repeat. You can do the number of rounds that feel comfortable today, just noticing what's happening inside as you do.

Close and journal. When you feel ready or your timer sounds, finish your practice with some box breaths to ground. You can then journal your experience, and any insights you had.

HEART BREATHING: FOR GENTLE COMPASSION

Heart breath (Gilbert 2010; Schwarz et al. 2017; Salzberg 2020) is a nurturing practice that grows self-compassion, warmth, and internal support. Heart breathing is helpful when you're feeling vulnerable or lonely, or when you need some attention through comfort and soothing. Because this breath focuses on your heart area, it teaches you how to feel cared for from within. For those who've experienced trauma in childhood, the heart area often feels sore, heavy, or guarded.

Heart breathing allows you to practice self-connection, while learning to pace with patience and gentle presence. It can also create newer pathways in your brain that associate your heart with compassion and presence (Salzberg 2020). Finally, it reminds you that in difficult moments, you can also turn inward for gentle support.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture, with closed eyes or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence or with music that feels soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice.

Notice your heart. Place one or both hands over your heart (either on your body or hovering just above) and allow the warmth of your hand to settle onto (or into) your chest. Go slowly and take your time. This gentle touch helps you connect with

your heart while still feeling grounded and paced in the moment. If physical touch doesn't feel comfortable right now, you can experiment with distance (e.g., putting something between your hand and your heart) or even skipping this step for today.

Inhale into your heart. Imagine that your inhaled breath is coming up from the earth or down from the sky. Inhale the breath into your heart or heart area. You can also visualize the breath as energy that feels (even gently) pleasing to you.

Spread heart energy. Experience the energy now generating in your heart (area) as patience and compassion being offered to you. You can also send this energy to other parts of yourself, either an emotion, sensation, or body part that needs it.

Exhale and repeat. Repeat this process for three to five rounds, until you feel better, or until you feel finished for today.

Again, as you experience this breath, you don't have to make anything happen. Simply generate this compassionate, heart-based energy, and then offer it to yourself or a specific part of you. Pleasant sensations at even a 2 out of 10 are something you can sit with or choose to enjoy.

Finally, if you're feeling a need to support someone you love, heart breath can be offered to their heart too—this can be done while sitting with them, or privately when you're on your own.

Vocal Toning or Humming: For Grounding, Pacing, and Release

Vocal toning or humming (Levine 2010; Porges 2011; Porges and Dana 2018; Schwarz et al. 2017) is an ancient practice that's part of many different therapy practices: somatic experiencing therapy, sensorimotor psychotherapy, comprehensive resource model (CRM), music therapy, polyvagal-based therapies, trauma-based yoga, and expressive arts therapies. Toning and humming are powerful

tools—their vibrations soothe the nervous system while mobilizing stuck trauma material. Vocalizing is a very organic practice that can be especially useful when other tools aren't helping.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture with eyes closed or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence or with music you find soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice if you like.

Settle in. Start by taking a few gentle box breaths to help your body settle into the moment.

Scan and notice. When you feel ready, scan inside your body and notice where something difficult is activating (e.g., a particular emotion, sensation, thought, or image). This can be something specific to the present (e.g., something upsetting from today), or a repeating issue you notice right now.

Find the sound. Now sit with the issue you've chosen today and begin to intuit the sound it might have. In other words, if you were to "tone the tone" of this particular issue (Schwarz et al. 2017), what sound might it have or make if it could (e.g., "ahhhh," "aaaaa," "eeeee," "iiiii," "ohhhh," "uuuuu," "rrrrr," or even a humming sound ("mmmmm") of a particular pitch, tone, or volume)? Because this isn't a logic-based practice, you don't have to know why—you can just intuit and allow.

When people talk about this practice, they often say things like, "I'm not sure why, but this feeling wants a long 'ohhhh' sound at a medium volume." Or "I don't know why, but the anger in my gut wants a slow, deep 'rrrrr' sound at a low pitch and volume." By offering your inner experiences sound, it lets them be seen, heard, and released without judgment. And this gives them a more organic way to mobilize–because these issues don't always release through logic or words.

Refocus. If your attention drifts or you're too into your head, gently bring your awareness back to your issue. Feel where it is active in your body now, then continue to experiment with the sound(s) it might need.

Tone or hum. Once you find the sound and volume that feels right (enough) for your chosen issue, inhale a nice breath into that area. Then begin to slowly tone or hum its sound. Do this up to three to five times, or the amount that feels comfortable today. Take any breaks you might need between rounds.

Pause and assess. Now, pause and attune to your issue in this moment. If it feels better, just notice that and enjoy, or you can tone the sound of that more pleasant feeling. If a change has happened but it doesn't feel pleasant, you can find *its* particular tone and continue the process. If the issue feels exactly the same, you can return to the sound or experiment with a new one.

Track your comfort. If at any point the practice becomes intense, slow down, take a break, or do some breath work to re-ground. You can also begin toning something positive to you (e.g., a pleasing image, a cherished item, an animal, or a safe person you love).

Close. When your timer sounds or you feel finished for today, close your practice with some breathwork that's grounding. You can then journal about your experience, or any insights you had during the practice.

Vocal toning and humming and can bring up different sensations, emotions, and even images in the mind. Some people feel warmth, tingling, a lightening, or a sense of movement or release in their body. Some feel emotions associated with calm or relief, while others notice more difficult emotions. Sometimes things can even come up that offer us clues about what still needs healing. Again, the goal here is to connect with one issue to offer it movement and presence through sound.

Body-Cocooning: For Containment

The practice of mentally cocooning your body can bring a felt sense of more balanced containment. Sexual trauma can deeply impact body boundaries, so your body can come to feel too exposed or too guarded (Fisher 2021; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; van der Kolk 2014). A sense that your body belongs safely to you might be a new experience that you're now exploring.

Body cocooning can help your body feel safer—either when you're alone or around other people. And just like the other exercises in this chapter, you can experiment with different types of cocoons you might need.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture with closed eyes or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence or with music that feels soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice.

Settle in. Take three to five gentle box breaths to help your body settle into this practice.

Welcome your cocoon. Now, imagine or feel the presence of a cocoon-shaped outline beginning to encircle (a part of) your body. Your cocoon might be made of light, energy, or a type of material that feels pleasing. It may have a color or a specific shape, or it might be thick or thin. It may have some type of movement about it, or arrive very still. It might also feel close to the edges of your body, or a little (or a lot) farther out. You're welcome to purposefully create your cocoon or simply experiment with what naturally arrives. It's really important to be patient with this process and allow yourself to just take your time.

Take pauses to assess. Now gently assess if your cocoon brings you feelings of containment, protection, or some kind of easing. If your body cocoon doesn't feel quite right, you can experiment to see what might feel better. You can play with

different aspects such as its distance from your body, its felt sense of speed, its thickness, or its material. In fact, you can have different cocoons for different parts of your life: certain emotions, sensations, situations, memories, or even for the different people you engage. All of this is perfectly fine—and a really important part of the process.

Notice "the nice." Once your body cocoon feels right (enough) for today, begin to notice how this feels for your body (e.g., allows a softening, relief, comfort, and so on). If your cocoon activates pleasant sensations, take twenty seconds to simply be with these. Even if these feelings are a 2 out of 10, enjoying this level is still perfectly fine. Next, take a short break and then reconnect, and repeat this process for three to five rounds.

Close. Once your timer sounds or you feel ready to close, your cocoon can stay with you or fade for just now. Creating body boundaries that aren't too tight or too loose may feel kind of new, so be patient with this. Regular practice while experimenting with options is a key way to grow this new sense inside.

Your Goldilocks Zones: Finding a Just-Right (Enough) Pace Inside

As you've learned, CSA can cause nervous systems to develop a pacing that's biphasic in nature (oscillating between states of intensity and shutdown). If this resonates with you, Goldilocks zones is a practice to work with your internal speeds. Like Goldilocks herself, you'll be learning to notice what's "too hot," "too cold," and also "just right" (or just right enough). This practice will let you work with these speeds without scorning, avoiding, or fighting to fix them.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit or lie down with closed eyes or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence

or with music that feels soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice.

Settle in. Start with some breath work, or vocal toning or humming to ground yourself into this present moment.

Scan your body. Now, bring your attention to the interior of your body. You can do a detailed scan or simply notice your body's general sections (e.g., above or below the waist, your left or right side, your front or back body, and so on).

Locate a speed. Locate the felt-sense of *one* inner speed that feels tolerable for you to work with today (a downloadable chart outlining these speeds is available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132). Next, notice where in your body this speed seems active. If you've located a speed that is running too fast, it might have these sensations: agitated, antsy, buzzing, clenched, compressed, distracted, fidgety, electrified, hot, racing, spinney, tight, or vibrating. If you're noticing a speed that's idling too slow, it might have these sensations: cold, collapsed, dull, empty, flat, floppy, foggy, gooey, hazy, heavy "meh," numb, spacey, stuck, or "zoney."

Be curious and suspend judgment. Once you've chosen and located your target speed, allow yourself to be with it. Avoid judgment, analysis, or trying to change it. Observe it objectively as it is in this moment.

Engage the speed. Once you're connected, you can work with this speed by:

- Find a mental image or metaphor that represents the speed (e.g., a shape, color, texture, or specific image). Notice the feel of the speed and the image that pairs with it.
- Now, gently attune to this speed, saying to it, "I see you. I feel your pace just now. You're welcome here. I'm learning to just notice and connect with you as you

are." You can offer three rounds of these statements, then pause to observe how the speed reacts (e.g., slows down, speeds up, stays the same). Again, simply notice.

- Offer it breath work, or toning or humming, or specific cocooning to support it just now. For example, you can say to the speed, "This fire breath is for you. I'll offer you three rounds and then just observe." Or, "I'll tone the sound of your speed for four rounds and then pause to notice any changes that makes." Or, "let's create a nice cocoon for you. Let's experiment with size, color, and material".

Choose a just-right speed. As part of healing, many women are ready to work with more regulated speeds inside. Internal balance can often feel limited, so finding an inner speed that's just right (enough) is important. A more regulated pace you can notice somewhere in your body might include these sensations: awake, balanced, calm, clear, contented, flowing, focused, lighter, open, relaxed, relieved, settled, softer, steady, warm. Even if the sensation is the size of a fingernail, you can work with this using the processes above.

Borrow a just-right pace. If it's tough to find a just-right speed *inside*, you can find something *outside* of your body to help. This might be: a soothing color, a pleasing object, imagining a regulated person you know, a guru you follow, a lovely sound, a favorite song, a gentle fabric, and so on. Now, see if you can imagine the pace of *this* object—then *borrow* this speed to "put into" your body. Even if it's slight or this pace comes and goes, keep returning your attention back to its feel (in your body). As this strengthens, you can begin work with this speed by applying some of the processes above.

Tucking-In Exercise: For Pacing and Rest

As kids—and adults—tucking-in rituals prepare our nervous system to wind down and rest. Such routines signal that it's safe to now calm and put away the different issues of the day. Therefore, tucking in isn't just about getting cozy. It's also about quieting different aspects of our life. It's true that our thoughts, feelings, situations, and to-dos also need respite so we can rest too.

For women with histories of CSA, tuck-ins in childhood may have been absent or unsafe. Moreover, if no space was offered when our tough moments happened, our body couldn't learn how to pause and just be. It might have felt safer to simply stay active, seeing periods of rest as indulgent or even dangerous. That's why learning to tuck in is an important part of healing—it teaches our system how to trust and unwind.

Your tucking-in practice (Schwarz et al. 2017) can be used at day's end to help you and your body downshift into rest. It can also be used to offer a pause after healing work, or give respite to triggers or tough situations. The really great thing about the tucking-in practice is its permission and reminder that intermissions can be safe.

Your practice:

Find a quiet place. Ensure you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably in a relaxed posture with closed eyes or a soft gaze. You can do this in silence or with music that feels soothing. You're welcome to set a timer for this practice.

Settle in. Choose a form of breath work, vocal toning, or humming to slowly settle into this practice today.

Notice something that needs tucking in. Whether you're preparing for rest or you're in the middle of your day, notice something you want (or need) to tuck in (e.g., a feeling, a body sensation, a situation, a person, a particular task, and so on).

A tucking-in spot. Imagine a tucking-in location for this issue. This can be a (metaphoric or real) safe container, a cozy room, a space in nature, or a distant location like a different city, country, or even another planet. Don't worry about the logistics or the physics of this. Notice what feels right for today, as you prepare to tuck in.

Tuck it in. Now, connect with this issue and say to it slowly, "It's time to pause now. It's okay to tuck in. I've created a nice place for you to rest. Our respite doesn't mean I'm letting you go. You're important to me, and I promise I'll return. I'll see you soon. Off you go for now." If you like or need, you can repeat these words (like you might with a child who is learning to settle). If you sense hesitation, this is really quite normal. You can offer your issue (without urgency or force) fire breath for resistance, vocal toning or humming for anxiety, or a specific cocoon for some additional containment.

Notice any sensations of regulation. As you tuck in you may feel some regulation inside (e.g., slight easing, a little relief, some calming, and so on) even if it's the size of a fingernail. Again, just attune to and enjoy this sensation in your body. You can even enhance it with some vocal toning or heart breaths.

Natural Expectations

Take a moment to honor the effort you're making as you're teaching your system to better ground and pace. At first, these exercises may feel odd, awkward, or simplistic—this is very okay and will shift over time. Like any new practice, you need patience and consistency. Please remember *each* practice does make a difference inside.

Finally, stay curious as you're learning to integrate these exercises. Some will feel natural (you may come to have favorites) while others may take longer, or stay tucked in for now. But it's important

to keep showing up, keep learning, keep practicing—these tools will be vital as we travel this book.

Let's keep going…

Key Points

- CSA disrupts our sense of balance, time, rhythm, and flow. An important part of healing involves reclaiming more regulation through grounding and pacing.
- Grounding acts like an anchor, helping you feel safer, more present, and capable of handling different emotions, situations, and life's challenges. Pacing regulates your internal speed, preventing cycles of feeling either too fast or too slow (biphasic arousal) either inside your body or out in your life.
- Five core practices to grow grounding and pacing in the nervous system include: breathwork (box, fire, and heart breathing), vocal toning and humming, body-cocooning, Goldilocks speeds, and tucking in.
- Healing through grounding and pacing practices takes patience, curiosity, and routine—progress grows over time, even after a few setbacks. Consistency is key!

Chapter 3

The Polyvagal Theory

A New Way to Understand Yourself After CSA

When you experience CSA, it can change the way you see yourself, others, and even the world around you. Many women find their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have changed in ways that are still tough to understand. It can also be frustrating when you've tried different strategies but old triggers and reactions continue to activate. You start to wonder if what happened in your childhood now needs something more.

In the early 2000s, a different way to understand trauma arrived. Psychologist and researcher Dr. Stephen Porges introduced the highly regarded polyvagal theory (PVT) of trauma. The PVT is important because it helps us understand why post-traumatic issues can endure—even after positive treatment interventions. It also offers insight into what a nervous system might need to better process CSA trauma.

The PVT looks beyond trauma's impact on just the mind. It also shows how trauma can alter the *deeper nervous system*—primitive parts of the brain and body that don't respond to logic, reason, conscious choice, or a sense of time (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). The PVT, along with somatic-based therapies, assert that *old threat-response patterns* can stay active in the nervous system after trauma. This helps explain why we can still over- and underreact even decades after the abuse has ended (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Maté and Maté 2022; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

Sofia's Story

Sofia felt exhausted. After three years of therapy with two different therapists, she still found herself triggered by men like her uncle. These triggers would send Sofia into spirals where self-doubt, insecurity, and toxic shame took over. She struggled to sleep or focus on her work, her mind buzzing with endless replays of the past. Sofia said, "I know the abuse wasn't my fault. And I know these men are not my uncle. So why can't I shake these old reactions, especially when I know better?"

Through the PVT, Sofia saw that it wasn't just her mind taking her back to the abuse. Deeper parts of her brain and nervous system remained traumatized, still activating defense cycles that hadn't completed. Though Sofia now logically knew she was safe—and had healthier ways to cope and talk to herself—she was learning her system remained on alert, still primed for danger and the next attack.

This realization was a breakthrough for Sofia and one that shifted the direction of her therapy.

Your Nervous System

Your body has a built-in system that quietly supports you behind the scenes. This is called your *autonomic nervous system (ANS)* and it's responsible for things you don't have to think about—your breathing, heart rate, internal organ functioning, and even how you react to safety and danger. Your ANS is active every moment of your life, helping you adapt to what's needed each day (there's a chart at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132 to help you visualize your nervous system functioning).

There are two branches of your ANS that play key roles in your everyday life:

- *Parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS):* When you feel safe (or safe enough), a specific part of your PSNS (ventral vagal pathways) helps you feel regulated, steady,

and connected to life. This aspect of your PSNS (in conjunction with other parts of your nervous system) lets you meet life from your window of tolerance—an internal state of optimal arousal that helps you navigate your world fairly effectively. Here, you experience healthy control, safe connection with yourself and others, and reliable ways of functioning day-to-day(Dana 2018; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020).

- *Sympathetic nervous system (SNS):* The other branch of your ANS is your sympathetic nervous system—an aspect of your brain and body that gets you ready for action when needed. When feeling safe (or safe enough), your SNS mobilizes the neurobiology for effort, focus, and adequate motivation (e.g., for working diligently, exercising, engaging in important challenges, and so on). Your SNS helps keep you energized and alert when different parts of your life require it (Fisher 2017; Porges 2011; Dana 2018; van der Kolk 2014).

When these two aspects of your ANS are integrated, you feel mobilized but also present and steady. Being able to shift between these states when truly needed is also a sign that your nervous system is stable.

Neuroception: When Threat Is Detected

The PVT tells us that our nervous system is constantly scanning for safety, uncertainty, and potential threat—even right now as you're reading this book. This scanning process is automatic, and usually outside of our conscious awareness. It operates through complex brain-and-body processes sometimes referred to as neuroception (Porges 2011). We'll talk more about this in chapter 5. For now, just know that when your neuroception perceives threat, your ANS help activate three self-protection responses: social engagement, fight-or-flight, and freeze-shutdown. Let's take a closer look.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT (WINDOW OF TOLERANCE)

If a threat is detected but a sense of safety is still present, your nervous system might first respond by using social engagement (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Porges 2011). Although different parts of your nervous system are active here, parts of your PSNS also help you stay connected.

Through social engagement, you'll use connection and communication to try to reduce or neutralize the threat: seeking support from friends, family, or a helpful authority—or calling out to strangers if the threat is more immediate. If help from others isn't an option, social engagement can help you connect with the threat. You might become focused, engage in eye contact, and use a steady voice and compelling words—all to negotiate your safety. And, if you continue to have distress afterward, social engagement can connect you to safe others. This can help you get proper support and help you process what happened to effectively recover.

FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT (HYPER-AROUSAL)

If social engagement doesn't eliminate the threat, your SNS may now activate your fight-or-flight defense. Here, your nervous system has determined that either fighting or fleeing are your best options for safety. Your SNS is amazing because it can rapidly alter your body to do things that it normally couldn't. Your blood flow increases, your focus intensifies, and your muscles become very powerful and strong. The energy you need to fight hard or run fast suddenly becomes available to you. And, if fighting or fleeing neutralizes the threat, this activation can gradually settle down afterward. Your heart rate will slow, muscle tension will relax, and your nervous system functioning can soon return to baseline (Levine 1997, 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

COMPLETING THE DEFENSE CYCLE

Here what's important to know: If your social engagement or fight-or-flight defense eliminates the threat and returns you to safety,

it means you were able to effectively *mobilize* and *complete that cycle of defense* (Levine 1997, 2010). As it turns out, this matters—a lot! Because not only do you successfully neutralize the threat but, in doing so, you discharge all of that defense-based stress in your body. This release can help your nervous system regain balanced functioning, helping to mitigate chronic post-traumatic issues (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Levine 1997, 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). Moreover, if a defense wasn't effective, and you had to endure trauma, proper use of social engagement *afterward* (from a safe parent, teacher, or skilled therapist) can also help reduce the trauma's impact (Fisher 2017; Maté and Mate 2022; Porges and Dana 2018; van der Kolk 2014).

Therefore, these two built-in defenses can return us to safety, while helping reduce post-traumatic suffering!

Journal: Completed Defenses

As you read, you might recall times when your nervous system rose to a true threat or danger—reaching out to someone, directly asserting yourself, or moving into fight-or-flight energy to help you. And if these were successful and you recovered well afterward, these are examples of you completing a defense cycle.

Below are some journal prompts to explore past experiences to help you integrate what you're learning here. You can choose at least two and write about an event that feels comfortable to explore just now:

- Describe a time when connection (i.e., social engagement) with someone helped you feel safe enough to stay present and deal with a challenging (or threatening) experience.
- Describe a situation in your life when a fight-or-flight response helped you neutralize a true threat or danger.

- Describe a situation when your fight-or-flight defense surprised you by activating outside your conscious control.
- Does your body remember a time when it activated a social engagement or fight-or-flight defense, and it felt good afterward (i.e., you felt like you completed a helpful defensive action, and you were truly able to rebalance soon afterward)?

The Last-Resort Defense: Freeze-Shutdown

What if social engagement or fight-or-flight are not able to eliminate a threat or danger? In other words, what if harm is going to happen, and there are no other options for escape? According to the PVT, a different part of our PSNS can now help activate our *last-resort defense*—an ancient but vital form of protection called *freeze-shutdown*.

Freeze-shutdown is like a built-in emergency brake that activates from older parts of the brain and body. It's a vital defense when we've run out of options (when you can't negotiate with, seek support for, fight off, or escape a threat) and harm or suffering is inevitable.

Through freeze-shutdown, your nervous system wants to ensure four things (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Levine 1997, 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014):

- You stay quiet and still to notice any potential escape options that arise.
- You stay quiet and still to avoid provoking more intense aggression and harm.
- You don't aggress or resist so the harm is over as quickly as possible.
- You have a way to mentally escape the suffering you can't escape physically.

Your Three Nervous System States

State	Physiology	Behaviors
Fight-or-Flight Hyper-Arousal	• SNS Dominance • Threat-Related Brain and Nervous System Activity	• Panic, Rage, Terror, Limited Control, Rigidity • Anxiety, Anger, Overwhelm, Narrow Focus • High Energy or Agitation, Tension and Bracing • Busier Thoughts, Wanting Control • Increased Alertness and Vigilance
Social Engagement Optimal Arousal Window of Tolerance (Regulated)	• PSNS Influence • Ventral Vagal Pathways • Well-Coordinated Brain and Nervous System Activity	• Eye Contact, Stable Tone, Engaged • Present and Coping Well (Enough) • Connecting with Self or Others, Feeling Safe • Content, Relaxed, Can Experience Pleasure • Rest and Digest Can Happen in the Body
Freeze-Shutdown Hypo-Arousal	• PSNS Influence • Dorsal Vagal Pathways • Threat-Related Immobilization Nervous System Activity	• Beginning to Zone and Disconnect • Numbing Out • Can't Think, Disoriented, Limited Control • Shutting Down, Deep Dissociation • Total Collapse, Fainting or Feigned Death

To accomplish this, all of that initial, mobilized energy (I.e., that intense social engagement or fight-or-flight energy) must now quickly lock down so our body can *immobilize* (i.e., become physically numb, mentally dissociated, temporarily paralyzed, or even unconscious) until the abuse is over. As trauma expert Peter Levine clearly asserts (1997, 2010), this type of immobilizing is *not* weakness, failure, or consent—of any kind! It is a primitive but necessary automatic defense that helps minimize harm and get us through trauma.

The Trauma Code—Mobilizing vs. Immobilizing

That was a lot of information, so let's do a quick review. If our neuroception detects something threatening and our mobilizing defenses (social engagement and fight-or-flight) return us to safety, our nervous system can regain healthy balance afterward, which can then mitigate our chances of post-traumatic issues. But when these defenses will not help, and enduring trauma is inevitable, the nervous system can activate our last-resort defense: the primitive response called freeze-shutdown. This automatic reaction is all about immobility, because stillness can help reduce further harm while helping us endure (or even survive!) the trauma.

Generally, immobilizing, in and of itself, isn't harmful to a nervous system *as long as it's paired with safety and calm* (e.g., a swaddled baby happily resting in her mother's warm embrace or a woman snuggled tightly with her safe and loving partner). Here, immobility is paired with safe social engagement—it is not about freezing or shutting down in fear. Not only does this feel good and build connection, but it can actually promote healthy nervous system functioning (Dana 2018; Porges 2011). In fact, that's why immobility paired with calm is an important experience during the critical period of childhood.

Problems can arise when immobility is *paired with fear* (Porges and Dana 2018; Porges 2011). Not only can this activate our

freeze-shutdown response, but it requires a shutting down of our defensive energy and chemistry (Porges 2011; Levine 1997, 2010). According to somatic therapy experts, not properly remobilizing and then completing these afterward can cause that stress to stay active in the nervous system (Fisher 2017; Levine 1997, 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Payne 2006). Moreover, we may also feel an ongoing sense of powerlessness because we weren't able to experience more active self-protection (Ogden, Minton, and Payne 2006). Now, chronic dysregulation or post-traumatic issues can result, something particularly toxic to a developing brain and nervous system (Ogden and Fisher 2015; Levine 1997, 2010; Siegel 2020; Schore 2002; van der Kolk 2014).

If only this incomplete survival stress could just fade over time, or drain out through talking, or belief and behavior changes alone. But, if you weren't able to complete a self-protection response (i.e., that cycle of defense), you can become like a lid on a boiling pot. The old pressure remains. That old energy churns. It leaks out and spurts until the pressure breaks through. Then the lid is replaced, the pot boils again, and now this cycle can continue (for years).

Once we remobilize and complete an old defense cycle, two things can become possible for us: We can calm our (long-held) post-traumatic reactions, and we can slowly gain access to healthier nervous system states (and their important abilities).

Remobilizing and Completing an Old Defense Cycle

Once they learn about this part of healing, almost every woman asks the following question: "This makes a lot of sense. So, now, how do we do this?" In the chapters ahead, we'll walk step by step through ways to experiment with gentle mobilizing practices—interventions you can try on your own, or with a skilled clinician trained in these methods. The good news is, deeper healing is still possible for you. With the right tools and support, your system can begin to loosen

and find gentle movement and greater freedom—even if it's been a long time.

For now, a good take-away is that the trauma is not all in your mind—literally! It has also been living in your deep brain and body. And it's been waiting for the chance to complete what it couldn't all those years ago.

Sofia's Story: Making Sense of Her Trauma Now

Sofia was intrigued after learning about these three defensive strategies. She now understood why her uncle still triggered her. In fact, Sofia noticed other defensive reactions she'd have in situations that were actually manageable. Sofia now saw that challenging old beliefs, trying new behaviors, and better coping skills still weren't enough. Her nervous system needed to discharge that old defense energy—the chemistry that locked down during her inescapable abuse.

Here's how Sofia saw it now:

When her uncle's abuse first started during a sleepover, Sofia initially tried social engagement to stop him. She asked to call her parents, but her uncle said they were unavailable. Sofia then attempted jokes to change his behavior "back to normal."

When this didn't work, Sofia fled to her room to hide under the covers to escape. When her uncle came in and continued to assault her, Sofia's body then began to fight—kicking and yelling at him to stop and get away.

Because of her age and childlike size, Sofia was no match for this determined man. Her nervous system now activated its last-resort defense—Sofia began to freeze and shut down. Initially, Sofia's body became still but alert in case an option to escape presented. But when it didn't, her mind became hazy and far away, and her body went numb, heavy, and slack. Sofia's nervous system knew the abuse was inevitable. Its job was now to minimize harm, quicken the event, and help Sofia endure it.

In understanding her nervous system's protection responses, Sofia felt a growing sense of self-compassion. Her loyal brain and body were just doing their job—getting Sofia through something far too much for any child.

Journal: Mobilizing Clues

If it feels comfortable, reflect on a time when you had a strong reaction to something that was actually benign—a sound, smell, person, video, or comment. Could this have been your body trying to complete an old protection response by releasing stuck energy from trauma? Could your strong reaction have been your nervous system thinking you're still at risk in some way?

You can journal about one of these experiences and explore what your body might have been telling you through these reactions. You can also notice ways your body might be trying to remobilize energy that had to lock down during trauma. For example, you might notice bouncing your leg when talking to an irritating person, clenching your fists when watching a show involving abuse, biting your lips when you feel too seen or exposed, sleeping in a position that allows for quick escape, feeling compelled to run or overexercise, cutting your skin to feel something besides numbness, feeling easily victimized to seek connection and support, or fantasies about fighting a bully. These can be clues about defensive reactions that couldn't complete after the trauma. In fact, through these reactions, different *parts* of you inside are also showing themselves.

In the next chapter, we're going to learn more about these self-parts, and how they appear when old trauma activates.

Key Points

- The PVT explains how trauma impacts the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which has two key branches that help support us—in both everyday life and during overwhelming situations: the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). When facing threat, these two branches activate three main defenses: social engagement, fight-or-flight, and freeze-shutdown.
- If social engagement or fight-or-flight succeed in eliminating a threat, the nervous system has completed its defense cycle and can return to balance—which may reduce the likelihood of long-term post-traumatic issues.
- When escape is impossible, the nervous system activates freeze-shutdown, an automatic last-resort survival defense associated, in part, with primitive PSNS pathways.
- Unfinished defense cycles (incomplete or undischarged social engagement or fight-or-flight stress) can cause emotional and physical energy impulses to persist. This can fuel ongoing trauma symptoms.
- Immobility paired with safety (like being swaddled or lovingly embraced) can strengthen nervous system regulation, but unprocessed immobility paired with fear can be toxic to a young and developing nervous system.
- Healing requires relearning to feel safe while remobilizing and finishing incomplete defense cycles. This is an important part of recovering beyond logic, insights, behavior change, or talk therapy alone.

Chapter 4

The Structural Dissociation Model

Why Your Post-Trauma Reactions Make Sense

Tracy's Story

Tracy, a forty-two-year-old woman, came to therapy because, for much of her life, she'd noticed some behaviors that were beginning to spiral out of control. Tracy drove herself to perfection in everything she did, including tasks that didn't require intense effort. As a result, she was often sought out to take on extra projects, fix others' mistakes, or be the voice of reason when friends needed help.

Despite all the praise and rewards for her efforts, Tracy's inner voice would criticize her relentlessly. Tracy felt like a fraud who would soon be found out and "dropped like a bad habit" by everyone. Even when she learned to set boundaries or say no, Tracy felt compelled to sense what others wanted from her. And while trying to fall asleep each night, Tracy analyzed the things she'd said throughout the day. She believed she was nothing more than random bouts of anger and a bundle of social gaffes.

Even though Tracy knew her thoughts were irrational, and she'd gained many tools to calm these behaviors, she still couldn't stop this debilitating cycle or make sense of why it kept happening in her life. Tracy was finally burning out.

When I meet with new therapy clients, they often tell me about unwanted or dysfunctional thoughts, feelings, or behavior patterns they can't seem to overcome. Yes, they've learned some insights and tools that, for a time, do help. Or they've employed their own brand of coping, including keeping busy, taking on others' problems, using substances to calm down, or over-seeking support from others. But despite all this, old impulses reemerge, creating confusion, frustration, and a sense of defeat.

What's really going on here? Why do these old patterns continue, and why can't our tools and strategies alone finally make them end?

One of the most illuminating things I've learned as a therapist is a user-friendly model that helps this make sense. This model pairs beautifully with the PVT, and shows why our old reactions continue despite new insights and resources, or the passage of time.

This is the structural dissociation model (SDM) of trauma, and it might offer illumination to you too.

The Structural Dissociation Model of Trauma

The SDM was originally developed by world-renowned trauma experts Ellert Nijenhuis, Onno van der Hart, and Kathy Steele (2006)—and it has been enhanced by Dr. Janina Fisher (2010, 2017) and her colleagues over the years. This important model gives us invaluable insight into trauma's lingering effects on the brain and nervous system.

Although it has complexities (that we'll explore later in this book), essentially the SDM tells us that important parts of the brain, nervous system, and personality develop well when we're fortunate to grow up in a home with unconditional love; safety; healthy and consistent parenting; good boundaries and appropriate discipline; real apologies when needed; and where we are seen, heard, and generally delighted in for who we really are. In other words, we grow up

experiencing others and the world as generally kind, trustworthy, and safe. This helps us develop solid emotional regulation, comfort being seen, a curiosity to explore, and an ability to share and receive. We learn to engage in self-reflection, critical thinking, and good judgment. We can take on goals and navigate different challenges (independently and with support), and we can feel safe being curious about our struggles, while seeking proper support for growth. Through this, we learn to care about ourselves and others, experience empathy, and build good connections with safe people. Finally, we don't just experience these abilities once in a while; they're how we respond to a lot of life (Fisher 2017; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006; Schore 2003; Siegel 2020).

When we have these abilities, it means our nervous system has developed a healthy state called the *window of tolerance*. This vital inner state grows over the first twenty-five years of life and supports our ability to socially engage (Fisher 2017; Siegel 2020; Siegel and Bryson 2011). In other words, it helps us feel safe, connect well with ourselves and others, and helps us create balance (Porges 2011; Schore 2003; Siegel 2013).

The SDM also shows what can happen when these positive experiences aren't offered to a growing child—or if trauma, abuse, or lack of proper support are also happening to her. Here, the child's window of tolerance (and its related brain and body functioning) may not develop as it should. Instead, something called *structural dissociation can* take over—causing parts of her nervous system to split off and go rogue. Now the child can become preoccupied with three things: danger (all the things that could hurt her physically or emotionally), self-protection (intense reactions to keep this from happening), and survival (getting through life each day). As a result, problematic ways of experiencing life now become the norm: frequent anxiety, anger, perfectionism, and hyper-independence, as well as avoidance, addiction, high dependence, or dissociation, to name a few (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Maté and Maté 2022; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). In fact, this focus on threat

can become a way of life—while any real sense of security feels out of reach.

The Brilliance of the Nervous System

When you think about it, this is actually brilliant…even deeply admirable. Our nervous system keeps a detailed record of all our unhealed hurts and lack of support, and now activates protective responses whenever something—even subtly—resembles an old trauma. Over time, this becomes so automatic that there's no pause to wonder if this level of protection is still needed. Our unhealed trauma has made the world feel unsafe, causing a focus on self-protection to become our new baseline. This means we now:

- *Avoid* anything that looks, even remotely, like the original trauma we endured
- *Defensively respond* to anything that looks, even remotely, like the original trauma we endured if it can't be avoided
- *Strategize* in whatever ways possible to get what we didn't in childhood—and from a world that has come to feel generally hostile or neglectful to us

Tracy's Story, Continued

At the beginning of the chapter, you met Tracy. Recall that Tracy was struggling with perfectionism, frequent hypervigilance to others' expectations, intense self-criticism, random bouts of anger, and a fear of rejection and abandonment.

When Tracy described her family growing up, she reported that her father was a chronic alcoholic. Although he wasn't overtly abusive, he often lost jobs or squandered the family's money. Because Tracy's mother worked hard to keep the peace,

she compensated by working overtime to pay the bills. With her parents largely absent, Tracy was in charge of managing her own life and that of her younger brother's. Tracy made their meals, organized their homework, and completed their morning and bedtime routines.

When Tracy turned ten, a young man in the neighborhood named Michael befriended her. Over time, Michael began to groom Tracy, making her feel seen, special, and finally understood. He offered money and gifts to her and her brother, and helped Tracy with chores assigned by her mom. Within three months, Michael began sexually abusing Tracy, something that happened over the next three years.

Because her father was preoccupied with drinking and her mother was busy keeping the family afloat, Tracy didn't feel she could tell them about the abuse for fear of causing further family stress. As well, Tracy was feeling really confused—she liked Michael's ability to make her feel special, but worried about his strict rule that their "love" remain private.

After describing this picture of her early childhood, Tracy had a wise insight: "It's like parts of me are still waiting for the next loss, or the next betrayal, or the next let down, or even more abuse. Even though I know better, it's like parts of me are soldiers still fighting a war that's over." Tracy was exactly right.

We All Have Parts

Have you ever said to someone, "A part of me feels…" or "A part of me wants to…" or "I logically know what I should do, but there's a part of me that…"? You've probably also heard those around you use phrases like this too. In fact, we humans talk about the different parts of ourselves a lot more than we might realize. What's important to know is that we all have these parts of self—sometimes called "ego states" (Watkins and Watkins 1997). They're very normal, have their own nervous system activity, and are necessary to help us

throughout life (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; Schwartz and Sweezy 2019; Schwartz 2021).

What do we mean by *parts of self*, and why do these develop inside? Well, it goes without saying that life is pretty complex—it's a multifaceted system requiring us to have different roles, responses, and specialized skills. Just like a successful business needs different departments with a variety of personalities and skill sets, or a healthy family needs different hierarchies and roles to manage important tasks, our inner world also needs specialized parts to manage the different aspects of our life.

As you can see, talking about our inner parts isn't just a metaphor or some idiomatic turn of phrase. In fact, many therapy approaches, including the SDM, emphasize working with these normal self-parts. This work helps us better understand ourselves and our reactions—especially after trauma. It also helps other important parts continue to grow if their development was neglected or stunted during childhood.

Our Three States and Their Parts

In chapter 3, we explored the polyvagal theory and how our nervous system meets life through three different states: social engagement (in our window of tolerance state), fight-or-flight (in our hyper-arousal state), and freeze-shutdown (in our hypo-arousal state). We also learned that while the social engagement state helps us feel safe and grounded (enough) to deal with everyday life and its challenges, our fight-or-flight and freeze-shutdown states can activate to help us during a real (or perceived) threat.

Now, here's where the SDM and PVT come together. Within each of these three nervous system states, there are different *categories* of self-parts that help us in different ways. And within each of these categories, there are *specific* self-parts that we can learn how to talk to and work with for healing.

I know this sounds like a lot, but bear with me here. A diagram later in the chapter will help you put this together.

The Engager Parts

When our nervous system activates our window of tolerance, we have access to a category of parts I call our *engager parts*. There are *two* types of engager parts:

- *The adult self:* a mature part of self that helps us navigate and manage the different needs of day-to-day life. Our adult self helps us relate well to ourselves and others, while appropriately navigating life's needs and challenges.
- *The core self*: a very authentic part of self that offers instinct and wisdom, complex maturity and love, and a desire for meaning and purpose in life.

The Protector Parts

When our nervous system moves into either a hyper-arousal (fight-or-flight) or a hypo-arousal (freeze-shutdown) state, a category of self-parts known as our *protector parts* can activate. Protector parts help us defend against threat, escape danger, or access hard-to-reach resources (Nijenhuis, van der Hart, and Steele 2006; Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schwarz et al. 2017).

There are *five* specific types of protector parts (we met some of these in chapter 3):

- *Fight* gives us power and strength to fight off a threat.
- *Flight* gives us power and strength to flee from a threat.

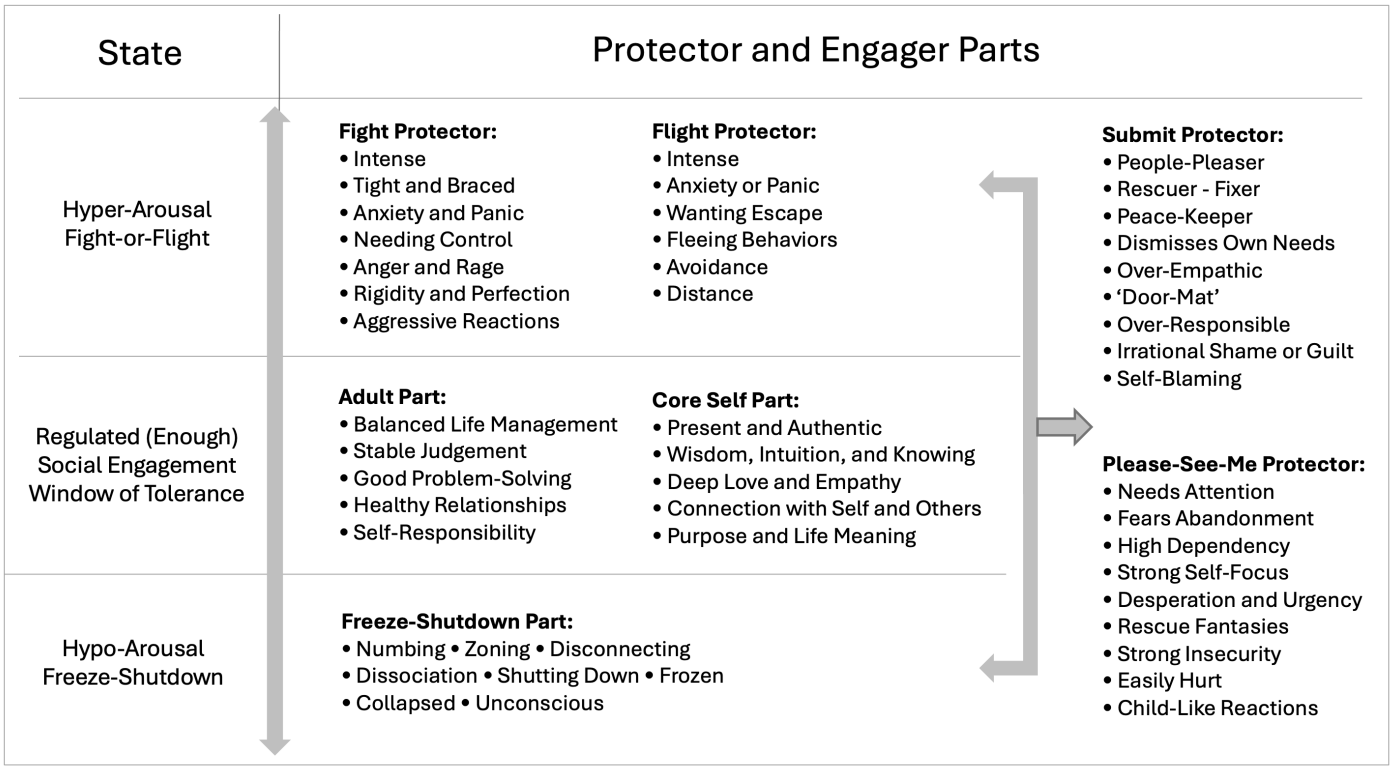
- *Freeze-shutdown* helps us numb, dissociate, or stay still and non-resistant to get through (or survive) a threat we can't escape.
- *Submit* helps us people-please, caretake, or rescue others for belonging, needed resources, or to keep things calm and peaceful.
- *Please-see-me* ensures we get noticed and care-taken when feeling highly vulnerable, incapable, or really alone.

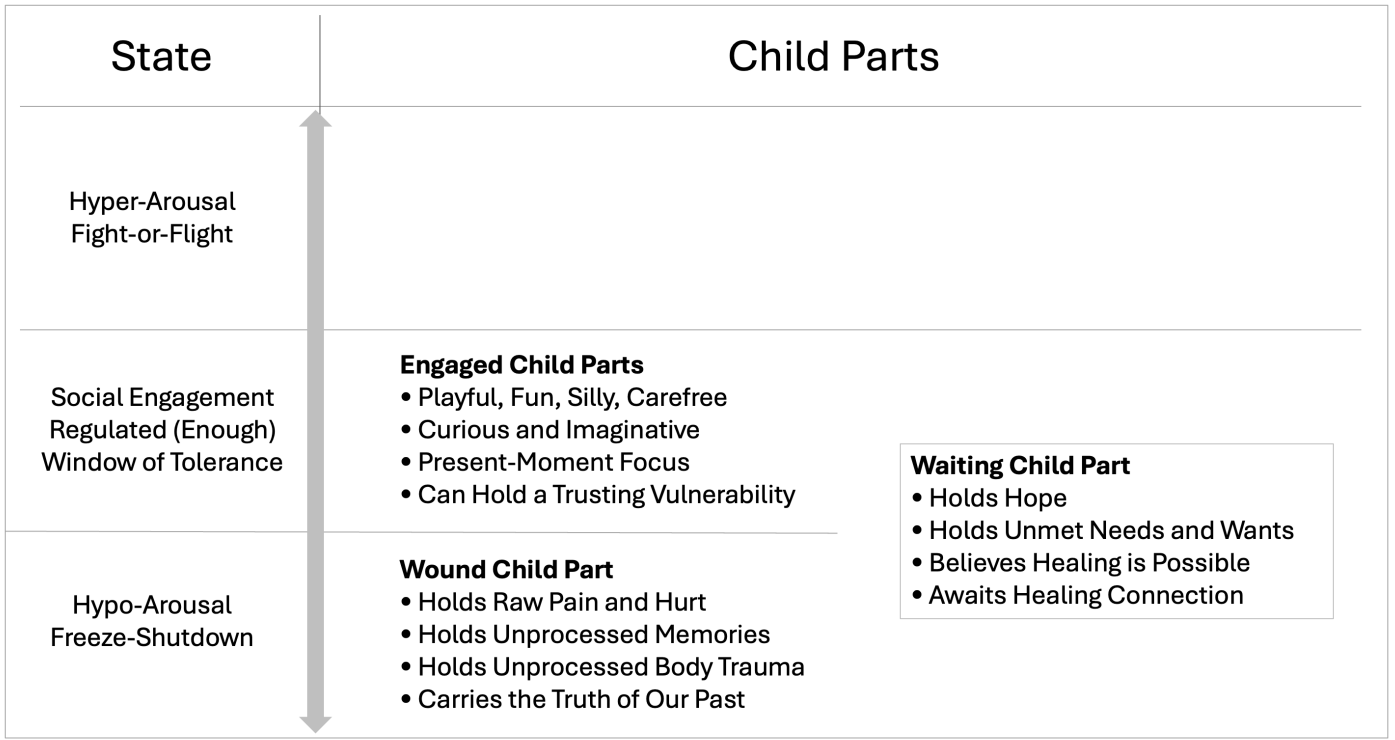
The Child Parts

Both the hypo-arousal and window of tolerance states house a category of parts called our *child parts* (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021). There are two types of child parts: the *wounded child* (Bradshaw 1990), and the one I call the *waiting child*:

- The wounded child holds our raw trauma-based hurts and tough memories that remain unhealed in our nervous system.
- The waiting child holds all our unmet wants, needs, and normal child-like impulses, hoping one day these can finally be met.

Below are two charts integrating the above information (color versions are also available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132). You can review these charts often to better recognize your parts, while building a framework for upcoming exercises.


State
Protector and Engager Parts
Hyper-Arousal
Fight-or-Flight
Fight Protector:
• Intense
• Tight and Braced
• Anxiety and Panic
• Needing Control
• Anger and Rage
• Rigidity and Perfection
• Aggressive Reactions
Flight Protector:
• Intense
• Anxiety or Panic
• Wanting Escape
• Fleeing Behaviors
• Avoidance
• Distance
Submit Protector:
• People-Pleaser
• Rescuer - Fixer
• Peace-Keeper
• Dismisses Own Needs
• Over-Empathic
• 'Door-Mat'
• Over-Responsible
• Irrational Shame or Guilt
• Self-Blaming
Regulated (Enough)
Social Engagement
Window of Tolerance
Adult Part:
• Balanced Life Management
• Stable Judgement
• Good Problem-Solving
• Healthy Relationships
• Self-Responsibility
Core Self Part:
• Present and Authentic
• Wisdom, Intuition, and Knowing
• Deep Love and Empathy
• Connection with Self and Others
• Purpose and Life Meaning
Please-See-Me Protector:
• Needs Attention
• Fears Abandonment
• High Dependency
• Strong Self-Focus
• Desperation and Urgency
• Rescue Fantasies
• Strong Insecurity
• Easily Hurt
• Child-Like Reactions
Hypo-Arousal
Freeze-Shutdown
Freeze-Shutdown Part:
• Numbing • Zoning • Disconnecting
• Dissociation • Shutting Down • Frozen
• Collapsed • Unconscious


State
Child Parts
Hyper-Arousal
Fight-or-Flight
Social Engagement
Regulated (Enough)
Window of Tolerance
Hypo-Arousal
Freeze-Shutdown
Engaged Child Parts
• Playful, Fun, Silly, Carefree
• Curious and Imaginative
• Present-Moment Focus
• Can Hold a Trusting Vulnerability
Wound Child Part
• Holds Raw Pain and Hurt
• Holds Unprocessed Memories
• Holds Unprocessed Body Trauma
• Carries the Truth of Our Past
Waiting Child Part
• Holds Hope
• Holds Unmet Needs and Wants
• Believes Healing is Possible
• Awaits Healing Connection

A New Normal After Trauma

After you've gone through an overwhelming experience, defaulting to self-protection is not a sign that you're broken. In fact, as renowned trauma expert Gabor Maté (2022) asserts, these are normal reactions to very abnormal experiences. I couldn't agree more! That's because the human nervous system isn't designed to go through repeated or deeply overwhelming experiences—particularly during that critical period of childhood (Siegel 2020; Teicher and Samson 2016; Schore 2001; Maté and Maté 2022).

Despite this, there are those in the world who will perpetrate their pain and aberrant impulses on the vulnerable among us—including children. When this happens, if the child has limited support, her nervous system can learn to structurally dissociate—her child parts will hurt, her protector parts will take over, and her engager parts' development will go underground. And, this can continue well into adulthood if she can't successfully remobilize and heal.

Analyzing Tracy's Story: Symptoms vs. Adaptations

When Tracy entered therapy, she initially talked about her many "symptoms." She reported that a previous therapist had diagnosed her with generalized anxiety disorder. Tracy wondered if her frequent fixation with her body was a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder, while also characterizing her perfectionism and "imposter syndrome" as symptoms of a "low self-esteem problem." Tracy even wondered if her periodic bouts of anger were a symptom of premenstrual dysphoric disorder.

Although it's important to be properly assessed by a skilled and qualified professional, Tracy was invited to also consider these experiences from another angle.

Upon re-examination, Tracy explained that her anxiety first started when she entered grade one. Because Tracy endured early

family trauma, she described herself as always desperate to belong. Tracy strived to be liked by all of her peers, especially the popular girls in her class. She pleased all her teachers, was seen as a helper, and diligently strived for a "perfect" appearance. Tracy always pushed herself for straight A's, while "flying under the radar" to avoid any "drama".

Tracy talked about her struggle trusting most men, and her ongoing issue with all forms of intimacy. Tracy also had episodes of "really intense" anger that would result in her "raging over the smallest things." Even when her people forgave her for these moments, intense guilt pushed Tracy to "regain their love" anyway.

Reconsidering these "symptoms" in the context of post-traumatic self-protection, Tracy now wondered if:

- Being hypervigilant to what others wanted, and then submitting to their expectations, protected Tracy from being unseen or neglected the way she had been by her parents.
- Anxiety and perfectionism (including body fixation) helped Tracy stay focused and motivated. This ensured she'd never be seen as average, dispensable, or forgettable. With this, Tracy felt protected from rejection, another common experience of her childhood.
- Perfectionism and the results that it gave Tracy helped her to feel there was something special about her. Because she always felt unremarkable to her parents, perfectionism helped Tracy to feel unique.
- As a child, when Tracy did feel special, it was often by her abuser, Michael. Tracy now wondered if striving for perfection put control of feeling special back in her own hands.
- Intense anger episodes may have helped Tracy's well-being because these offered a discharge of suppressed neurochemistry. She also admitted this anger felt

powerful with its message that Tracy was "not to be messed with."

Tracy knew that these reactions needed healing, and weren't a free pass to behave in hurtful ways. But Tracy now saw these as helpful coping mechanisms, not just as pathology or resistance to change. They also gave hints that Tracy's nervous system still saw the world as dismissive, unsafe, and self-serving.

Learning the Language of Trauma

As we've learned, during trauma, deep and primitive parts of the brain and nervous system can automatically activate and take over. It's not a conscious choice—it's our biology protecting us in whatever ways it deems necessary. We've also learned that because these survival mechanisms activate from the deep brain and nervous system, they *don't always use the language* of words, insights, or updated time. Therefore, despite good intentions, more left-brain (logic-based) approaches can't always reach these still-traumatized parts (Fisher 2017; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2026; Levine 2020; van der Kolk 2014).

Therefore, although very helpful, healing childhood trauma needs more than storytelling, new understandings, or cognitive-behavioral strategies. We must also learn a new and unique language—that speaks to *the lower right brain and nervous system* (Levine 1997 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015; van der Kolk 2014).

Meeting Your Parts

Before we explore this new nervous system language, let's first spend some time getting to know your inner parts. This can help you make sense of some of your reactions, while showing your parts we're getting ready to hear them.

Let's begin by noticing who's present inside—a process we can dub "role call." By giving your parts some well-paced

attention, we can begin some initial connection and trust. This will also help as we move forward with some healing exercises to come.

Your practice:

Settle in. Find a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. You can close your eyes or hold a gentle gaze. You can do this in silence or with music you find soothing.

Recall each category. Refer to the parts charts earlier in this chapter, or their color versions at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132. You can review your three nervous system states and their three categories of parts we're going to explore: engager parts, protector parts, and child parts.

Focus in. Choose one of the parts categories to work with, whichever you wish—you can do this with conscious choice or by noticing which you're drawn to.

Find a symbol. Find or create *a symbol to represent one of the parts* in your chosen category (e.g., your fight part from the protector parts category, your waiting child from the child parts category, your adult self in the engager parts category, and so on). You can use whatever mediums you like (e.g., drawings, photos, pictures from the internet, crafts, or specific objects). Here, you're just exploring what it's like to work with one part more concretely and tangibly. Your symbol can be elaborate, simple, or abstract. Whichever feels best to represent it just now.

Journal. Once you've established your chosen part's object, reflect on this exercise in your journal. The following prompts will guide you with this—you're welcome to reflect on (at least) three:

- What parts category did you choose to work with, and what seemed to attract you to this?
- What specific part within that category did you choose to work with, and what seemed to attract you to this?

- Is this a part of yourself you're familiar with or a part that confuses or frustrates you? How so?
- How do you notice this part's role in your life now? In which situations? With which people? How often does it seem to activate? What methods of help does it tend to offer you?
- Did this part also show up in your childhood? Or not? Are you glad it did or didn't? How so?
- How did you feel being (a little) more connected with this part? How did your logical brain make sense of this self-part? How does your deeper nervous system feel about this part?

Key Points

- In safe and supportive childhoods, during the first twenty-five years of life, the nervous system develops capacities for emotional and physical regulation, curiosity, empathy, and connection—in other words, a solid window of tolerance with social engagement abilities. Sexual trauma and neglect can disrupt this, creating structural dissociation and intense coping strategies—here, child and protector parts begin to activate even during moments that are safe.
- Our nervous system's protective mechanisms are creative, intelligent, and can quickly show up whenever a physical or emotional threat (real or imagined) is suspected.
- Everyone has these different self-parts to manage different needs throughout life. Three categories of parts align with three ANS states:

- Window of tolerance—PSNS—social engagement abilities: Engager parts include the adult self (responsible, task-oriented, and balanced) and the core self (authentic, wise, and purpose-seeking).
- Hyper-arousal—SNS—fight-or-flight abilities: Protector parts activate through fight, flight, freeze, submit, or please-see-me defenses when threat (real or perceived) is suspected.
- Hypo-arousal—PSNS—freeze-shutdown abilities and window of tolerance-PSNS-social engagement abilities: Child parts include the wounded child (holding our raw, unhealed pain) and the waiting child (longing for incomplete needs, wants, connection, and playful impulses to finally be allowed).

PART 2

Your Parts, Their Roles, and Beginning to Connect

Chapter 5

Your Protector Parts

Fight, Flight, Freeze, Submit, and Please-See-Me

The methods used by our *protector parts* tend to become problematic over time. They're often the parts that first get noticed, and are usually why we enter therapy. So, in this chapter, we're going to get to know your protector parts a little bit better. But first, let's talk more about the process of neuroception, something we briefly discussed in chapter 3.

After inescapable trauma, it's vital to receive proper support. This allows us to feel heard and validated, and remobilize incomplete defense cycles.

However, if left alone with this unhealed trauma, the nervous system might cope by reshaping its functioning. We can then respond to (even ordinary) life from a frequent state of fear and overprotection (Fisher 2017; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Levine 1997, 2010; van der Kolk 2014).

A significant consequence of unhealed trauma can be a change in our *neuroception process*. As we learned in chapter 3, our neuroception acts as an internal sensor that decides if something is safe, benign, or threatening (Dana 2018; Porges 2011). When well developed, our neuroception generally tags things accurately, cuing us to respond in the most fitting way. But after unhealed trauma,

especially during childhood, our neuroception's functioning can become impaired. It can become too sensitive, seeing potential threat everywhere, or not sensitive enough, leaving us numb to true danger (Dana 2018; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). Here, life becomes like Goldilocks's porridge—too hot or too cold but rarely just right.

Too Hot: Imani's Story

Imani grew up in a neighborhood where every corner felt familiar—fun-loving kids, lots of animals, and kind and friendly neighbours. But when Imani turned nine, this neighborhood developed into a landscape of hidden terrors for her. Two older teen boys began abusing Imani under a shroud of secrecy and threat. Not only did this wound Imani's body and mind, it reshaped how her neuroception now read the world. Instead of expecting kindness and safety, her neuroception anticipated cruelty and control. Everyday things were now tagged as potential threats, so deep hypervigilance became Imani's default. And because her family was not good with emotion, Imani had to deal with this all on her own.

As Imani grew older and the abuse finally ended, the aftershocks of trauma continued to show. A stranger's lingering gaze would trigger high alert while Imani's body was always tense and braced. Imani's neuroception now signaled her to be ready for the next intimidation, loss, or hurtful betrayal.

More subtly, Imani's impaired neuroception routinely saw danger in her different relationships. A slight change in tone or delayed text response was flagged as impending rejection and pain. Even when she knew these fears were illogical, Imani's body awaited more abandonment and neglect. Imani's life was now based in fear despite having tools to help her cope.

Too Hot
Hyper-Arousal
Urgent and Rapid
Going Fast
Speeding Up
Panicked, Raging, Overwhelmed, Loss of Control
Anxiety, Racing Thoughts, Hypervigilant, Tight, Rigid
Nervous, Competing Thoughts, Growing Stress, Bracing
Just Right
Regulated (Enough)
Alert and Coping
Engaged • Regulated
Aware and Coping
Attentive, Perked Up, Becoming Elevated
Present, Balanced, Capable, Relaxed, Content, Joy
Gently Aware But Present
Too Cold
Hypo-Arousal
Slowing
Sluggish
Still and 'Off-Line'
Zoning and Gently Disengaging
Feeling Heavy, Detached, and Checking Out
Frozen, Shutdown, Disconnected, Dissociated
Nervous System Speeds
Where Are You Right Now?

Too Cold: Pam's Story

Pam had a brother who was five years older. David, known as the neighborhood bully, began to abuse Pam at home. At first, he emotionally tormented Pam, calling her horrible names and degrading her looks. But as Pam got older, David began sexually abusing her, leading to a series of nighttime assaults.

Because David was bigger and stronger, because the assaults happened when their parents were asleep, and because her brother made serious threats if she told, Pam's only defense was to now immobilize. Moreover, Pam's neuroception noticed David's increased aggression whenever Pam tried to fight or escape. Therefore, Pam's freeze-shutdown became a vital defense to temper more vicious assaults from happening.

Pam's home life offered her little protection. Her parents were dismissive and emotionally selfish. They drank and fought frequently, creating a hostile homelife. And they were always too distracted to notice Pam's pain or abuse. With such limited options, Pam's nervous system now entered a state of constant disconnection. Unless drunk or high, or feeling pain through self-harming, Pam no longer felt much inside. As the numbness took hold, Pam's neuroception abilities also became faded and dulled. Over time, she was known as being too trusting, often missing red flags for "poor choices" in life.

In reality, Pam's system got early training in how to dismiss signals for danger (and to endure danger through stillness and numbing). This left Pam vulnerable to toxic relationships, staying in jobs with abusive bosses and coworkers. Even in friendships, Pam often connected with those who exploited her "easy-going" nature. Ironically, the immobility that helped Pam survive now blinded her neuroception to the red flags she needed.

Neuroception is such an important brain function because it alerts us whenever a threat is nearby. When our neuroception senses threat—real or imagined—it then signals a protector part to activate to help us: fight, flight, freeze-shutdown, submit, or please-see-me

(Anderson, Sweezy, and Schwartz 2017; Fisher 2017; Porges 2011). This relationship between neuroception and our protector parts is natural—and plays a key role in our responses after trauma.

Finally, healthy neuroception is important because it lets us know when we are really safe—and when we can *approach something good*—a nice experience, a positive person or relationship, or a good opportunity that fits for us. But, without these signals for true safety in life, we no longer feel safe to engage. Instead, we meet life with distrust and self-protection, and different defenses that now limit us.

A Simple Analogy

The built-in carbon monoxide (CO) alarm in your home is similar to your neuroception function.

When a CO detector reads safe levels of oxygen, we move about our homes with calm and ease. However, when dangerous levels of gas are detected, it sounds an alarm, prompting life-saving action. Similarly, when neuroception accurately assesses our safety, we feel trust to engage what life has to offer. But, when neuroception flags a potential threat, it triggers our nervous system to defend or withdrawal. It will prompt us to respond with quick self-protection–activating one or more of our protector parts.

Our Five Protector Parts

Every person I've counseled knows just how much I respect our five protector parts. These parts inside are always on the clock, available whenever our neuroception signals them. Our protectors, along with their brain and body chemistry, have a vital job throughout our life—to keep us safe, help us cope, and to get us what we need to survive. Moreover, they do this with an intense fierceness and loyalty, using specific tools and methods unique to each.

Let's take a closer look at how each protector part specifically helps us.

Fight Protector

Fight's primary job is to keep us—or others important to our life—safe. And its tools include various forms of action that always involve *intensity and speed*.

Our fight part can use the following tools and methods: Intense frustration and anger; physical or verbal aggression; argumentativeness; frequent fault-finding and complaining; frequent opposition; hypervigilance; worry and anxiety; panic; high defensiveness; sanctimony; arrogance; distrust of others; guardedness; high self-reliance; and avoidance of appearing vulnerable. Racing thoughts; compulsive planning; perfectionism; overworking; being over responsible or taking over for others; heavy determination or pushing through; high rigidity and adherence to rules or routines; obsessiveness, compulsiveness, or difficulty letting things go. A strong need to understand and quickly make sense of things; intense passions; urgency to solve problems; a constant sense of pressure. High control of oneself or another; suicidal thoughts or actions (Fisher 2017, 2021; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

Flight Protector

Flight has a very important purpose in our life—*aiding escape* from physical or emotional threats.

Our flight part can use the following tools and methods: Physically withdrawing or escaping from people, places, or situations; running away; chronic avoidance of difficult feelings; quickly or frequently cutting off relationships; procrastination; blocking commitments; abdicating responsibilities. Rationalizing things away; dismissiveness; denial; apathy. Excessive daydreaming; overuse of screens or technology; bingeing on shows; frequent distraction from

important tasks; overworking to avoid other aspects of life; burying oneself in "good" projects to avoid something painful. Sleeping too much; lethargy or disinterest in taking action. Binge eating; overuse of substances or partying; excessive shopping or spending; excessive sexual behavior; gambling (Fisher 2017, 2021; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

Freeze-Shutdown Protector

Our freeze-shutdown protector part is so important in our lives—it helps us *survive and endure* the inescapable. It also helps to keep us immobilized so harm can be minimized and over more quickly.

Our freeze-shutdown part can use the following tools and methods: Frequent emotional numbing; feeling disconnected from life, others, or oneself; zoning out; physical, emotional, or cognitive immobilization; chronic hopelessness; inner emptiness; limited energy. Discomfort being seen or noticed—either positively or negatively—with a strong urge to hide or be invisible. Dissociative experiences such as depersonalization (feeling disconnected from yourself or like you're watching yourself), derealization (feeling like the world is unreal, dreamlike, or distant), leaving the body (Fisher 2017; Fisher 2021; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

Submit Protector

Submit helps us to *please and appease* (Walker 2013) if confrontation or resistance could cause harm or loss. Our submit response likes to avoid problems by seeking approval or by rescuing others. It can activate when we need emotional or physical safety, belonging and acceptance, a reduction in chaos and a need for peace, or important resources that seem hard to access.

Our submit part can use the following tools and methods: People-pleasing; placating; over-focusing on others' expectations,

desires, or needs; trying to predict or manage what others want; consistently putting others first; fixing or rescuing behaviors; striving to be liked by everyone. Avoiding boundary-setting; not saying no; always saying yes; not speaking your truth; swallowing true feelings like anger or resentment; tolerating bad behavior; feeling overly responsible; taking the blame for others; irrational self-blame, guilt, or shame (Fisher 2017, 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006; Walker 2013).

Please-See-Me Protector

The please-see-me protector part seeks *connection and care*. Its main function is to compel others to notice what we need. This behavior can stem from early life stages when attachment to our caregivers was our main form of support. In adulthood, this part can activate when we feel neglected, invisible, overwhelmed, or helpless.

Our please-see-me part can use the following tools and methods: Activation of "needy" feelings and behaviors; frequent crying or intense emotional expression; frequent connection-seeking; regularly (over-) sharing problems with others; attention seeking in various forms; intense self-focus; feeling powerless or helpless; feeling easily forgotten, misunderstood, or victimized; feeling discomfort when alone. Sensitivity to rejection, boundaries, or hearing no; dramatizing or overreacting to compel a response from others; fantasies of being adored or rescued; strong self-orientation and focus on unmet needs. Aversion to self-soothing or self-reliance; feeling childlike and highly dependent (Fisher 2011, 2017, 2021; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006).

It's important to know that we all have protector parts…and we need each of them throughout our life! They're vital when we encounter true danger or, when in a pinch, we need something we can't access. But these parts become a problem when their heavy-hitting methods activate too often or too intensely for us. They're also problematic when they block us from responding with healthier actions in situations we can handle.

Faulty Neuroception

When biphasic arousal (reactions to life that are too hot or too cold) becomes our norm, it can feel like we've lost control of our life. Our neuroception's faulty assessment of events can now create feelings of confusion and self-distrust. Life begins to feel like a constant effort—that it's passing us by instead of us truly living it.

Living in overprotection mode causes obvious issues: strained relationships, distrust and anxiety, chronic stress, avoidance of certain experiences, loneliness, and emotional burnout—life comes to feel exhausting and meaningless. And while our protector parts activate only from good intention, we can no longer feel our true self inside—or a life with real balance, meaning, or ease.

Discovering Your Protector Parts

People often find that their nervous system leans toward one or two protector parts particularly—almost like a *protection personality style*. In this exercise, you're invited to explore which protector parts your nervous system seems to default to—during a real or perceived threat of some kind. By recognizing your primary protectors, you might start to see patterns in your post-trauma reactions. This awareness can help you begin to consider where you might still over- and underreact.

Your Practice:

Settle in. Begin with two grounding or pacing exercises of your choice from chapter 2.

Review the tools of each protector part above. Consider which ones resonate most with you. Is there one protector part that shows up more often in your life? Perhaps two parts that seem to tag team and work together? Do people ever offer feedback that seems to point to one or two of these protector parts in your life?

Self-reflection. Choose at least two of the following prompts to explore in your journal:

- Which protector part(s) do you notice in your life? Which ones might others have noticed in you?
- Reflect on a recent situation where you felt stressed, insecure, anxious, or threatened (to a mild or strong degree). Which protector part came forward to help you? What tools did it use? How did that feel? What was the outcome?
- Did this level of protection seem truly necessary for that situation? Was there a real threat or danger that required this type of protection? Might a more regulated part of you have handled it differently? How so?
- How do your protector parts influence your relationships? How do your protector parts show up in your interactions? Does this create too much distance or too much closeness with people (or them to you)? What are the benefits and struggles this protection style creates?
- What situations seem to trigger your protector part(s) most? Are there certain environments, people, circumstances, or stressors that activate your protector part(s) more quickly than you'd like? What patterns do you notice, and where might these stem from?
- How might life be different if one of your protector parts took a step back? What might you like about this idea? What scares you about this idea? Does this feel safe to explore at this stage of your healing? Does it somehow feel risky to respond using more regulated parts of yourself? How so?

Close. Complete this exercise with one or two grounding or pacing exercises from chapter 2.

Imagining Life Without So Much Self-Protection

Unless we're actively living in emotional or physical danger, our protector parts are not meant to lead our daily lives. As the PVT reminds us, we are *also* wired for connection—that is safe, fulfilling, and rooted in health. It's actually deeply human to seek out safe others to create and enjoy moments that matter. It's also vital that we connect to our true selves (not just our protector parts), and that we learn to do this with a sense of presence, safety, comfort, and healthy entitlement. Nature designed us not just for survival but for belonging, security, meaning, and purpose. Therefore, secure connection—and its gift of social engagement—is not just a luxury. It's what makes life worth living.

As women become acquainted with their self-protection style, a gentle curiosity begins to awaken: *What lies beyond this? How can I begin to better assess true safety and threat?* And perhaps most of all—*What might safer social engagement look like for me?*

Gemma's Story

After an adolescence of sexual assaults by her mother's boyfriend, Gemma lived her adult life from intense hypervigilance. She always feared her partner would leave her, while bracing for her friends' eventual disloyalty. At work Gemma would imagine endless worst-case scenarios while constantly second-guessing her own inner knowing. Gemma was fueled by a fear of more hurt, so her loyal protector parts were always on alert.

Deep down, Gemma knew she longed for something different. She fantasized about feeling safer and more engaged. She wanted more days where she could trust herself better, and believe in the people she'd brought into her life.

As Gemma talked more about this possibility, she imagined the way this just might look: Instead of shrinking back from her partner's affection, she'd lean into receiving his warmth and his

caring. Conversations with others would feel more relaxed, with more fun and less pressure to look good and perform. To Gemma the world would feel less harsh and fickle, with no invisible audience critiquing her constantly.

With a growing sense of safety, Gemma could feel more spontaneous, with a bit of curiosity about the things she might like. She could better assess the true motives of people, and set chosen boundaries without aggression or fear. And Gemma could finally have a relationship with herself, making space to explore what mattered most to her. "It would be like the world saying, 'It's okay. Take your time. There's lots of safety and patience for you here.'"

Finally, as Gemma reflected on her loyal protector parts—that had worked so hard to help her survive—she liked the idea that she had other parts too, available, capable, and waiting to lean forward. Unlike her protectors, these parts were not built to just guard and react or cope and endure. They were designed to reach out, to connect and make meaning, and to give Gemma moments of security and ease.

These were her engager parts, and they could help Gemma build a life of mobility, that was more of her own.

Key Points

- Our nervous system has five protector parts with their own brain and body activity: fight, flight, freeze-shut-down, submit, and please-see-me.
- Neuroception is the body's built-in safety detector system—constantly scanning for cues of safety and threat. After unhealed CSA, protector parts are always vigilant, ready to step in for us when threat is (accurately or incorrectly) perceived. After trauma, especially during the critical stage of childhood development,

neuroception can become impaired—either too hot (seeing danger everywhere) or too cold (missing real danger cues).

- Life with a lot of unnecessary self-protection strategies makes it difficult to: access healthy connection, feel security and ease, or a have a meaningful sense of self or authenticity. Access to our engager parts—designed for relationships, purpose, and joy—can become overshadowed by fear and disconnection.

Chapter 6

Your Engager Parts
The Adult and the Core Self

In the last chapter, we saw how unhealed CSA can rewire your nervous system for heavy self-protection—even long after the trauma is over, and even when life has become safe again.

Women sometimes ask, "Isn't it actually better to remember the pain and stay in protection mode? Doesn't that lower my potential of ever being hurt again?"

This is a very understandable question, especially from someone who's gone through so much. But here's the thing—neuropsychologists are pretty clear that when the brain learns to focus on pain and self-protection, this can prevent other important parts of the nervous system from developing (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; Schore 2009; Siegel 2020). In other words, when your protector parts take over—especially in situations that don't need their intense methods—other parts of you, and their related nervous system functioning, can't grow and come online. Therefore, even if you want to experience presence, curiosity, and safe connection, you'll still feel anxious, reactive, avoidant, or shut down. Your protector parts continue to commandeer your life—and you start to feel like they're all you've got. That is unhealed trauma.

What are these *other* parts of you inside that let you live a life *beyond trauma*? I call them the *engager parts*. And even if you've rarely felt them, they're still available to you inside. In fact, science now shows that reclaiming these parts isn't just possible—it's a vital

part of healing and creating a healthier life. (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Schwarz et al. 2017; Schwartz and Sweezy 2019).

The Adult Self and Core Self

Inside our window of tolerance nervous system state lives the category of self-parts I call the engagers. This state and its parts give us emotional and physical regulation, safe connection with ourselves and others, paced curiosity, and a more meaningful presence with life.

In this category there are two specific engager parts:

The adult self: a functional, grounded, and mature part of self that can engage, think clearly, use good judgment and planning, and effectively manage life's different tasks and demands (Fisher 2017; Schmidt 2012; Schwartz 2021; Steele 2006).

The core self: the deeper, authentic, and timeless essence of you that brings wisdom, love and compassion, creativity and inspiration, and inherent worth and purpose to life (Maté 2003, 2008; Schmidt 2012; Schwartz 2021; Schwarz et al. 2017; Steele 2020).

In many ways, it's these two engager parts—your adult and core selves—that brought you to this book. They carry a quiet knowing that life can hold more for you than fear and self-defense. They also know that you are deserving of the security, meaning, and gentle joys they can connect you with.

Let's take a closer look at each of these parts.

What Is the Adult Self?

Your adult self is an important engager part because it helps you navigate life with presence and balance. Think of your adult self as a

competent inner parent, or a stable and capable internal friend. This part can reasonably assess and implement what life needs from you, such as healthy judgment, appropriate communication, and effective decision-making. It's the part of yourself that keeps you organized and centered, while navigating relationships with good people who fit you. Your inner adult offers you self-reflection and good insight so you can assess what you need, and grow from mistakes. The maturity of this part helps you find your right pacing, feel present and grounded (enough), and navigate tough situations.

Aisling's Adult Self

At thirty-six, Aisling came to therapy feeling constantly "overwhelmed by people." In her marriage, she was often resentful and bitter. She was increasingly overwhelmed by her kids' needs and meltdowns. And because she routinely dismissed her own needs, Aisling's pressure would build until she'd explode with anger, then "neediness." Although she really did want better connections, she just couldn't shake this "hair trigger" overwhelm.

Although she grew up in a stable single-parent home, Aisling suffered CSA at ages six and eleven—each time by someone outside of her family. Aisling feared telling anyone, including her "emotionally tough" parent. So, she hid the abuse until age nineteen, when she decided to tell her best friend, Brigid. Not knowing what to say, Brigid told Aisling to forget it, that "it wasn't really healthy to overthink the past." Aisling wished it were that simple, and feeling totally invalidated, vowed to never again disclose the abuse—until therapy.

In her sessions, Aisling came to see that her nervous system was stuck in protection mode, and discovered just how much she truly distrusted people. She also noticed how often isolation overtook her, making her feel like a lonely, needful child. Aisling's fight and please-see-me protectors were working overtime, keeping her stuck in a cycle she called "fear-explode-shame."

It was then that Aisling learned about the category of engager parts, specifically her adult part and the help it could bring. As she developed compassion for her loyal protectors, Aisling also became curious about her inner adult. Aisling liked the idea of reading people's expectations more realistically, setting healthy boundaries without guilt or fear, properly sharing her needs with less distrust or shame, and being present and supportive when her children really needed her. More than anything, Aisling longed to feel relaxed and secure with the safer people she now had in her life.

What Is the Core Self?

Your core self—sometimes called the wise self—is similar to your inner adult because it helps you stay grounded, form deeper relationships, draw on instinct and wisdom, and shape a life with meaning and purpose.

But your core self also offers you something more: a sense of wholeness inside that feels like the *real you*. It's a sense that you're more than your roles and achievements, and that you're naturally (and healthily) entitled and inherently worthy.

When you connect to your core self, you move beyond layers of protection and all of the ways you've had to cope and get through. Your core self is what lets you feel healthily deserving—to be seen, to be heard, and to take up safe space. It's knowing there has never been another person just like you—and that underneath the trauma your core self remains. As trauma expert Gabor Maté (2022) clearly asserts, even after trauma there is nothing fundamentally wrong with you. Yes, you may carry scars and types of coping that now need tending and gentle transformation. But there's an essence at your core that remains *untouched* by trauma—it's intact and waiting to re-join you in your life.

I very much agree! And while for many this often feels brand new or hard to believe, it is the truth about you—and it is part of your birthright. Your core self cannot be stolen or destroyed, even on the hardest day of your life.

Aisling's Core Self

Although still in progress, Aisling was feeling more connected to her adult self. She better understood her triggers, was feeling greater permission to stick to new boundaries, used clearer communication, and was learning to pause to consider her options. Aisling was doing better—and she liked this sense of healthier control. But now she was noticing something else that was missing—a more meaningful connection to what she called her "true self."

Aisling began wondering if her core self could illuminate truer passions—while engaging them with less urgency, perfectionism, or doubt. She liked the idea that her core self's creativity could try new things without the pressure of perfection. Aisling liked thinking she could be warm and compassionate, both with herself and those she really loved. Maybe she could even face memories without panic, instead feeling soothed by a patient presence inside. Aisling wanted to feel more relaxation and fun, while being more playful with herself and her kids. Finally, Aisling was curious about her deep instinct and wisdom, especially during complex moments in life.

In therapy and between sessions, Aisling was building her relationship with her core self a bit more each day. Little by little, she was able to notice that this fundamental part of her was still alive inside. Over time Aisling integrated some of the gifts of her engager parts—and in a way that felt grounded and well-paced to her. She was surpassing a life of only pain and protection and starting to touch upon more lightness and mobility.

When Engager Parts Are Late Bloomers

The adult and core selves aren't just theoretical concepts—they have their own brain and body functioning too (Fisher 2017; Levine 1997; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020). Unlike other self-parts that are available from birth, engager parts—and their particular neurophysiology—need time to grow and mature (Blakemore 2018; Fisher 2017; Jensen and Ellis Nutt 2015; Siegel 2013). In fact, the brain's prefrontal cortex and certain parts of the vagus nerve (both of which help us access our engagers) are not fully developed until our mid-twenties (Giedd 2014; Neufeld 2017; Lenárd et al. 2004; Schore 1996; Siegel 2013). But for many, because of childhood trauma and neglect, these neurophysiological structures will have to develop in adulthood.

What is it, specifically, that activates our engager parts, and that window of tolerance state that houses them? Simply put, it's the good or "good enough" (Winnicott 1965) experiences our parents and caregivers give us from birth (Fisher 2017; Neufeld and Maté 2004; Schore 1996; Siegel 2020). As we learned in chapter 4, these parts of ourself and their specific neurophysiology develop through: steady, consistent, and loving connection; feeling safely seen, heard, and understood for who we are; the proper meeting of our physical and emotional needs; and consistent and healthy boundaries and discipline (Fisher 2017; Perry and Szalavitz 2017; Porges 2011; Schore 2009; Siegel 2012). We must experience positive attention, warmth and playfulness, empathy and proper attunement (feeling understood even if not agreed with), and mature and consistent guidance (Neufeld and Maté 2004; Schore 1994; Siegel and Bryson 2011; Winnicott 1965). And if we happen to experience trauma during childhood or adolescence, our safe grown-ups must believe us, gently and lovingly support us, and get us the right help to heal. When this happens, our healthy self-development can continue, with problematic interruptions becoming less likely (Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022; Perry and Szalavitz 2017; Schore 2009; Siegel 2012). As you

can see, our parents have a lot to do with the parts of ourselves we can access in life.

What if your parents weren't available for you this way? What if they were struggling with their own unhealed trauma or emotional immaturity? Or what if they weren't capable of being properly there for you during or after the abuse?

Well, here's the good news: Your brain and nervous system can grow throughout life because of something experts call *neuroplasticity*. Neuroplasticity is a fancy term that means even in adulthood, we can grow our brain and nervous system (Doidge 2015; Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). This process, sometimes called *developmental catch-up*, lets us finally grow what we should have in childhood—solid connection and consistent access to our safe and mature adult and core selves.

Parenting Your Brain and Nervous System

You may be asking yourself, *How do you actually do this—grow the neurophysiology for greater maturity and wisdom?* It's a good and fair question. Here is the answer: While growing your safety (through grounding and pacing) and remobilizing incomplete defensive reactions, you also begin to invite your engager parts to have some vital practice time (Bradshaw 1990; Fisher 2017; Schmidt 2012; Steele 2020; Whitfield 1987). In other words, because these parts were overshadowed in childhood, they had limited practice taking the reins. Like children rehearsing their more grown-up skills, your engager parts want to show you their gifts. This doesn't mean you'll need twenty-five years (like in childhood). But it does mean some practices can help you grow these parts now. There's an exercise below to help get you started.

It's really important to remember that growth doesn't happen right away, and reaching perfection is never the goal (even for actual parents currently raising young nervous systems!). I like to say that if your engager parts are active about 80 percent of the time, your inner and outer worlds should feel pretty functional.

A Five-Day Practice for Engager Parts

To help maximize this practice you'll need a journal, nice pens or pencils, colored markers, different craft supplies if you wish, a quiet and comfortable space, calming music if you like, your phone or tablet for the instructions, and your earbuds if you prefer. During this exercise, you'll work with only one engager part at a time—either your adult or core self—for the full five days. You can repeat this exercise with your other engager part later if you wish.

Your Practice:

Day 1—A symbol of your adult or core self. When developing something new, certain parts of the brain learn better when we have a tangible or concrete item to keep us focused. Today's practice is about finding or creating a physical object to represent your adult or core self (whichever you are working with this week). This symbol will remind you that the seeds of this part are already within you, and that you are now in an active relationship-building process with it.

Today, consciously find or create something concrete that, for this week (and even beyond), will represent your adult or core self. For example, an object from nature, an image you find or create, a photo or small collage, a special token you own or buy, a meaningful piece of jewelry, or simply a color, a particular shape, or a word or description you write on a cue card. Whatever it is, take your time. This is important and meaningful work. (Again, make sure this object is something you can physically hold, not something just imagined or viewed on a screen.)

Once you have your object, go to your quiet space and do two grounding or pacing exercises from chapter 2. Next, just sit with this object (whether holding it, placing it close by, or even somewhere farther away in the room), and begin to feel its presence (a sense of its vibe or energy) in whatever way comes today. Take at least thirty seconds to do this (more if you like), then take a thirty second break. You can repeat this for at least three rounds. (Additional option: You can listen to a guided audio

practice to enhance your connection-building with this object and the part of you it represents at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132.)

To support this connection, you can write your initial impressions in your journal using the following prompts. Choose at least two, and just allow yourself to go with this experience—logic or full understanding isn't required:

- What did you notice—feel, sense, or think—when you first found and then sat with this image or object? Did anything surprise you about your initial connection?
- If you had to describe the vibe of this engager part in just a few words, what would they be—steady, calm, present, strong, gentle, curious, wise? (Remember, engager parts are not about blocking. So, if you felt fear, trepidation, anger, shame, and so on, that is likely a protector part feeling wary about this exercise. But if you gently asked the protector to step aside for a moment, what would you be able to sense from your engager part?)
- How does your engager part seem to feel toward you (or this process) today? Does it want to support, guide, comfort, or simply be with you? How do you know this—through words it offers you, a presence about it, a sense in your body, or images it shows you?
- If this part could speak, what might it want you to know right now? What kind of encouragement, reminder, or wisdom might it offer you at this stage of your connection?
- Today you'll also decide the way you'll relate with your object when not actively doing this practice. Will you keep it in your pocket, next to your day planner, in your handbag, on your body, or somewhere with a little more distance for now? What might drive your decision for today?

Day 2—Deciding the when and where. Because your protector parts have likely been quite active in your life, let's consider when and where you'd like your engager part to be a little more present in your life. In your journal, and with limited self-judgement, consider the following questions:

- In the last week (or two), in what situations have my protector parts come out?
- In the last week (or two), what specific methods have my protector parts used to try to help me?
- Were these protector parts needed for these situations? If yes, how so, and what were the outcomes? If no, how so, and what were the outcomes?
- How might my adult or core self (whichever you are working with this week) have handled one of these situations differently? What might this have looked like instead? (Be as specific as you can even if you're simply pondering this.)
- How might I have felt after my adult or core self handled that situation? How might I have felt a few hours or even days later?
- How might others have felt (or reacted) to the actions of my adult or core self in that situation?
- When a protector part takes over a situation that my engager part could handle, what's a respectful way I can ask my protector part to step aside for just now?

Please know that you don't have to try to make your adult or core self be really present right away. This exercise is simply for noticing, being curious, and imagining something different at this stage. That's all you need to do. Let's keep going—you're doing great.

Day 3—Noticing your engager's speed. Earlier in the book, we've talked about different nervous system speeds. For example, when protector parts are active, they often move at speeds that feel really fast (hyper-aroused) or pretty slow (hypo-aroused). This makes sense because, as we know, very fast and very slow speeds can help a lot in the face of true threat.

But as you're building connection with your adult and core selves, you'll notice that they move at speeds very different from hyper- and hypo-arousal—because engagers' speed is about balance, presence, and steadiness. Our window of tolerance state (where they live) is about regulation.

When protector parts have been our default for a (long) time, our brain and body can get used to *their* speeds. So at first, a more moderate pace can feel boring, confusing, or even unsettling or unsafe (even if this doesn't logically make sense). As you start to connect with your adult or core self, you'll be training your nervous system to adjust to their pacing—that more balanced speeds can be safe and okay.

For today's exercise, please visit http://www.newharbinger.com/57132 to download the "nervous system speeds" chart, and access the ten-minute guided audio practice to work with engager part speeds. Then, after this practice, choose at least three of the following and reflect in your journal:

- What was my body and nervous system's reaction to today's practice? Did it feel calming and better, uncomfortable in some way, or a mix of both? Please explain.
- Did noticing and experimenting with a different nervous system speed create anxious feelings, confusion, or even distraction or shutdown? Be as specific as you can.
- Can I imagine becoming more comfortable with the balanced inner speeds of my adult or core self? How so, or why not just yet?

- How might the more balanced speed of my adult or core self help me in day-to-day life? List three potential benefits and explain each to whatever degree you can.

- Write a little note to yourself that shows some gratitude or pride for actively experimenting with this different speed today. Keep it where you can see it for the remainder of this practice week.

Days 4 and 5—Practicing adult or core self skills. As you gradually build more connection with your adult or core self (whichever you are working with this week), you may want to practice some of the specific abilities and experiences this part offers. Because there are many, let's start by choosing five, and then experiment with two of these today and tomorrow. (At http://www.newharbinger.com/57132, there is a helpful download with a list of specific engager skills to reference and choose from.)

- From the list, choose any five abilities of your adult or core self (whichever one you're working with this week) that appeal to you just now. In your journal, list the five you've chosen.

- Of these five, now choose and circle the two that you are most interested in exploring at this stage in your healing (even if you're not sure why).

- Now, choose one to work with today (or tomorrow depending on when you start this part of the exercise) and one to work with tomorrow (or the next day). Please know that you don't have to use these skills in any kind of complex or well-developed way. This is just about experimenting with two adult or core self abilities, along with their related nervous system speed.

- In your journal, choose one page for today's skill and one page for tomorrow's skill. Under the first skill,

describe how it might look to use this specific skill in real time. For example: Where might you use it, in what situation, and with whom? What specific words might you say, what particular action might this skill invite you to take, and what nervous system speed might you feel when using it? To help with this, imagine you're watching a mental movie of your adult or core self activating this skill for you. Then, simply describe what you see using the questions above.

- Practice this skill (even briefly) at just one point today using the above description as your guide. Again, this doesn't have to be perfect—at all. This is just about gently connecting and experimenting with the feel, speed, and ability of your adult or core self.

- Afterward, or at the end of the day today, in your journal, write about your experience. Use the prompts below from a place of observation and curiosity—without heavy critiquing or self-judgment. This is the normal process of learning. You're simply gathering information to notice and help you proceed. Choose at least three of the following:

- How easy or difficult was this for me?

- Did using this skill of my chosen engager part activate any fear, concern, or resistance for me?

- Did any of my protector parts want to activate to help to any degree? If yes, how did I notice this? When the protector part stepped forward to take over, how did I respond? Did this feel okay?

- Did I feel less or more seen by others when using this skill of my engager part? What emotion(s) or sensation(s) did this create inside? Where do I remember feeling these in my body? How tolerable were they today?

- What felt okay enough to make me want to experiment with this engager skill again?
- What might need a little tweaking in using this engager skill another time?
- How do I feel about myself having experimented with this today?

Tomorrow, repeat this exercise for the second skill you chose, beginning with describing how it might look as you use it.

Engaging in this five-day practice—in the way that feels right for now—is an important step toward your healing and growth. Your adult and core selves have been waiting to join you and take their rightful place in your life. As you strengthen your relationship through patience and good practice, you'll be doing a lot more than just moving beyond survival. As your engager parts strengthen, they'll become allies in your healing, bringing the compassion, tolerance, and wisdom you'll need.

The other important thing about your adult and core selves is that they can offer your hurt child parts what they've been missing for so long. These children inside have carried raw pain and unmet needs, and in a way that's unfiltered; they dutifully hold your hard truths. With no choice, they've held trauma too big for a child—but they had to, because nothing else was available. Therefore, the important abilities that your engager parts offer are the very things that were unavailable during your childhood. It's these grown-up parts that can finally help these wounded and waiting children inside.

In the next chapter, we'll learn more about your inner child parts and the gentle rescue they've been awaiting.

Key Points

- Overprotection is one core feature of unhealed trauma. Protectors take over while engager parts stay overshadowed—keeping them from activating and more fully developing.
- The two main engager parts are the adult self (grounded, paced, mature, and capable of solid emotional and social skills) and the core self (authentic, wise, meaningful, and inherently worthy and lovable). Engager parts not only help us live life more fully, but they also offer conditions for healing after trauma (e.g., compassion for parts, connection with good resources, healthy insight, patience, planning next steps, better emotional tolerance, and pacing).
- Engager parts may seem distant or absent, but renewed connection with them can happen well into adulthood—through proper and consistent acknowledgement and healing practices.

Chapter 7

Your Child Parts

The Wounded Child and the Waiting Child

In this part of the book, we've explored three main categories of self-parts—each with its own set of tools and gifts for navigating life: protector parts, engager parts, and now the equally important child parts. Although our engager and protector parts tend to be most noticeable in our daily life, it's often the pain and unmet needs of our child parts that keep us stuck after CSA (Bradshaw 1990; Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schmidt 2009; Steele 2020; Whitfield 1987).

In this chapter, we'll focus on two types of child parts: the *wounded child* and the *waiting child*. Though frequently avoided or suppressed because of their intensity, these parts are not passive remnants of the past. They are alive behind the scenes, holding important truths: what happened to us, what never got to happen for us, and what still longs to be completed. When we meet these child parts with patience and understanding—and learn the particular language *they* speak—we can finally see and validate their needs, which then helps our other parts get healing too.

How Child Parts Get Triggered

Before we learn more about the wounded and waiting child, I'd like to pause and offer some important context. When our child parts

are triggered, at the root of this is fear—especially when vital needs feel threatened or lost. Therefore, understanding this can be really important (and help with healing) because it lets you meet these inner children with more clarity and compassion.

The fears of wounded and waiting child parts can be triggered by many things, some that are obvious—but some that seem (logically) small or harmless. What often matters isn't the reality of the trigger, but whether it *activates a core fear in a child part*.

In my experience, we humans have *four core fears* that are particularly tender after a childhood of trauma: *loneliness, powerlessness, lack of access to essential resources,* and *annihilation*. These may sound intense, but they really are very human and can show up a lot in our everyday life. Again, understanding this matters because our repeating distress is rarely just about a present-day situation. Here, one of our core fears has likely also activated—something that then provokes our sore child parts.

The first core fear is *loneliness*—triggered by experiences of perceived loss, dismissal, rejection, or some type of abandonment (big or small). This can also be triggered when we feel different than others, misunderstood, invisible, or unworthy to belong.

The second core fear is *powerlessness* or *loss of control*—triggered when options feel gone and there's no way to change this. Even when we logically understand this differently, our child parts might still feel forever trapped or immobilized.

The third core fear is *lack of access to essential resources*—those needed for our physical, emotional, or spiritual well-being. This can be triggered when a child part feels a meaningful absence, unreliability, or some kind of unfairness.

The fourth core fear is *annihilation*—a fear of being erased or made non-existent either physically, emotionally, spiritually, or at the level of one's sense of self. This fear can be triggered by aggressive situations where we feel we could be engulfed or disappear completely (Kernberg 1975; Mahler 1975; Winnicott 1965). Even when we know this isn't logical, it can feel deeply real to a traumatized child part.

The Wounded Child: Keeper of Pain and Truth

Both during and after CSA, our wounded child part can show up a lot. It's the part of us that feels deeply alone, terrified, confused, small, and powerless. It carries raw feelings that haven't been seen, truly understood, or properly processed. Often, the feelings of our wounded child parts get quickly overshadowed by our dutiful protectors—these race to the rescue so we don't have to feel the level of vulnerability these child parts carry (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schwartz 2021).

Kaley's Wounded Child Part

Kaley, a thirty-seven-year-old nurse, was repeatedly sexually abused by her grandfather. Before therapy, Kaley routinely dissociated, especially during moments of intimacy with her wife. Gentle affection or another person's caring made Kaley's whole body stiffen and recoil. Even in staff meetings, she would freeze and go blank especially when being given positive feedback. Kaley always felt like an exhausted imposter, "a little girl pretending to be a confident grown-up."

Kaley sought therapy because of frequent child-like reactions: falling apart when overwhelmed, lashing out in different ways when challenged, and needing the TV on at night to fall asleep. She was perpetually overwhelmed by a world she described as always feeling "too big and too much."

Kaley's child parts still carried trauma memories—visual and body memories that were rooted in fear. Despite being an adult, Kaley's system was on high alert, lost in a time when she was powerless to abuse. Kaley finally wanted more freedom for herself—so it was time to gently meet her wounded child parts.

The Waiting Child: Keeper of Longing and Hope

Unlike the wounded child, the part I call the waiting child does not primarily carry pain. Instead, this part lives in expectation. It keeps dutiful track of our losses and needs in hopes that one day these can finally be met: a protective adult to tell; a clear acknowledgment of the trauma's impact; loving, balanced and effective support; and being truly seen and known beyond the abuse. The waiting child holds all our lost justice and never forgets what should have been.

Kaley's Waiting Child Part

With healing, Kaley understood why she often felt like an overwhelmed kid. While her wounded child part made sense to her, discovering her waiting child part surprised her. With support, Kaley noticed how this part kept track of her losses and longings. It also explained why she fantasized about being rescued, rooted for justice on crime shows, volunteered to save neglected animals, and dreamed of a future very different from the present. Her waiting child believed justice could prevail and that her rightful life and identity was still a possibility for her.

In learning about these parts of herself, Kaley understood a difficult truth: These child parts couldn't be healed by proxy—their healing had to happen through Kaley herself. Although deeply unfair, this is picking up the pieces after a childhood of unhealed sexual abuse. Therefore, rescuing others—or having others (her protector parts) rescue her—couldn't substitute for tending to these inner children, or being guided by the important truths they still bravely carried (Bradshaw 1990; Fisher 2017; Whitfield 1987).

Recognizing the Wounded Child

The wounded child holds the truth of our past harms. Emotionally, she may show up as deep sorrow, grief, deep loneliness, emptiness, toxic shame, powerlessness, raw fear or terror, and a hopelessness that anything can change. She doesn't have balanced strategies or inherent defenses; she simply lives in pure insecurity and pain. Bodily signs of this inner child part can include heaviness; aches; feeling physically small; a sense of being "dirty" or contaminated; childlike postures; a hollow gut; feeling very exposed; feeling nonexistent; and a deep vulnerability. These experiences aren't chosen—and they need more than distain, suppression, or even different coping tools. They need recognition, compassion, and trauma-informed healing (Fisher 2017; Levin 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; van der Kolk 2014). That's because this brave child part carries our "weight."

Recognizing the Waiting Child

The waiting child may show up as deep longing or endless expectation. She clings to hope: to be safely seen, heard, believed and understood, helped, delighted in, and loved just for who she is. She longs to play and to finally experience contentment, curiosity, dreams, and real and healthy connection. She is also present when we come alive through lightness, movement, adventure, silliness, and fun. This inner child needs and deserves proper healing—because this brave child part had carried our "wait."

Noticing the Child Before Protectors Swoop In

When child parts appear, they do so with raw honesty. They bring unfiltered truths—*important clues*—to what still needs healing. But our protector parts read this pain and longing differently—as

something threatening that must be eliminated. So, our protectors swoop in with their different tools and methods, completely overshadowing the child's message to us (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021). Over time, we can miss or even forget that these children (and their brain and body circuitry) are still alive inside.

It's vital to catch the truths of our child parts before our protector parts shield us from these. Therefore, a task of healing is recognizing, then widening, an important space that I call *the gap*: that brief space *after* the child's pain is triggered, but also *before* self-protection takes over.

Sarika's Story

Sarika struggled to visit her parents' house. Their relationship was okay—but Sarika always felt anxious and nauseous driving up their road. Before having kids, she avoided this discomfort by hosting her parents outside of their home. But because her children wanted to visit this house, an old pain was now resurfacing for Sarika.

In therapy, Sarika had begun to explore sexual abuse by her fourth-grade teacher. Back then, Sarika was struggling with math, so her teacher had offered her private tutoring. Sessions began after school in the classroom, but soon the teacher suggested Sarika's home—specifically their quiet basement rec room. During the fourth session, the teacher abused Sarika, something that continued the next two sessions.

During the abuse, Sarika's nervous system activated submit and freeze-shutdown to help her get through it. After session six, she refused further tutoring; and pleased with her grades, her parents agreed. At school Sarika stayed near peers and safe adults, avoiding the teacher as best as she could.

Because her parents deeply respected authority, Sarika never told them about her trauma. She "eventually moved on," logically knowing the abuse was wrong and not her fault. But now as she revisited the place where it happened, that moment after triggering was becoming important: that gap between when her

child parts stirred (shock, powerless, shame, dread) and her protectors activated methods to shield her (hypervigilance, avoidance, and dissociating). This gap was a place for some unfinished healing.

Sarika learned how her protector parts helped when her childhood pain was triggered during visits:

- *Fight showed up with anxiety and panic to keep Sarika alert and on guard.*
- *Flight generated plans for escape—turning the car around or claiming illness to leave early.*
- *Submit used guilt to make Sarika commit to visits at her parents' house because she'd promised her kids.*
- *Freeze-shutdown used dissociation and numbing to help Sarika tolerate these in-house visits.*
- *Please-see-me over-sought comfort from her husband and kids to soften Sarika's emptiness once back home.*

Sarika didn't have an anxiety disorder, or a fear of commitment, or a needy personality. Her dutiful protectors were still swooping in blocking Sarika's connection to her childhood pain.

How to Connect with Child Parts

Before we begin to connect with your child parts, it's really important to start with some acknowledgments. First, we honor your loyal protectors inside who have worked tirelessly to help minimize your hurt. When you've felt at a loss, these dutiful efforts were so often what helped you keep managing life.

But now we must also acknowledge these child parts, that have held hard, raw truths—and with great strength and bravery. And

they've likely done this without much recognition, carrying a weight that no child should have to.

Your wounded child needs to hear that the abuse wasn't her fault—that she really was powerless to a calculating perpetrator. She now needs her pain to be properly seen and heard, and with gentle understanding, compassion, and presence.

As well, your waiting child needs to know that her longing has been vital—that it has kept a healing vision alive inside for you. She also needs permission to grieve what was lost, and gently remind you what your life can still hold.

A starting place for this is to create a space of slowing; a space of warmth and patience so exploration can begin. And it's asking the urgency of the protector parts to pause—to step back and "unblend" for a moment or two (Levine 2010). This allows your child parts a little more space, with your dutiful protectors standing by if truly needed.

Again, it cannot be overstated that having to do this may feel new, awkward, and even really unfair. Absolutely none of this was your fault, and yet you're the one who is left to repair it. And you're right about this. It is not fair! In fact, it's one of the saddest truths of trauma healing.

Having said that it's also important to carry *this* truth: With gentle, properly paced, and purposeful practice, healing can help you feel more in charge—of how *you* hold your past, how *you* get to feel, and where *you* might want your life to go now. In other words, you—your adult and core self, and their powerful gifts—can now (learn how to) offer these sore children healing (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schmidt 2009 2012; Steele 2020).

Connecting with Child Parts

The following exercise helps you begin to connect with either a wounded or a waiting child inside. This exercise is also available to you as a guided audio practice at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132. (If you carry a lot of pain or often dissociate, please do this practice with a trauma-informed clinician.)

To support your proper pacing, this exercise will use a practice called *pendulation*—moving in and out of connection with a child part so the dosing of this feels healthy and tolerable (Levine 1997, 2010). The goal here is to go slow and not rush. It's important to remember that slower is faster.

Your practice:

Choose the child part and its symbol. Decide whether you'll work with a wounded or waiting child today. Then, find or create an object to represent this child—an item you own or buy, something from nature, a piece of jewelry, an image or drawing, a childhood photo or small collage, or even a word or phrase on a cue card. You can take your time with this.

Space, ground, pace. Create a quiet and comfortable space. Then, place your chosen object somewhere that feels right—on your body, near you, or even across the room for now. Choose two grounding or pacing practices from chapter 2 to help your nervous system settle into the practice. Although you don't need to feel completely calm, a 7-out-of-10 presence is a good benchmark.

Attune to your child part. Set a twelve-minute timer. With eyes closed or softly hazed, set an intention to connect with the child part you've chosen today. Begin to sense her presence, even if it feels far away or awkward. Let her know you just want to practice some very gentle connection today, and without analysis, judgment, or trying to make anything happen.

Locate your child part. Notice where this child part seems to be in this moment—somewhere in or around your body. If that's difficult to notice, you can simply focus on the object that represents her today. Because trust takes time, if protector methods activate (e.g., agitation, resistance, distraction, dissociation, and so on), know that that happens, and you can acknowledge them kindly: "I see you. I know you're just trying to help. I'm building gentle connection with this child part inside. We'll go slowly; I

promise. Please step back a bit just for now." Then return to the presence of your child part.

Guiding prompts. Some helpful prompts you can use to help you include:

- When you attune to this child part, what's one thing that seems to get your attention—positive or uncomfortable?
- What sensations, emotions, images, or thoughts arise, even subtly?
- Does the child feel open or guarded today? What mood seems to be present?
- If this child had a body posture just now, what would it look like? How would it feel?
- What words would you like to offer this child? What words might she want to hear? What do you sense she might want you to know?

Ground and pace with the child. If any uncomfortable feelings come up (especially above a 5 out of 10), you're welcome to pause and integrate a grounding or pacing practice from chapter 2 (e.g., toning the tone of the child's feelings, fire breath for releasing difficult sensations for her or a protector part, heart-centered breaths for compassion toward this child, or a cocooning practice for rest and containment).

Pendulate. After connecting with this child for ten to twenty seconds (or more if you feel comfortable), gently pendulate (shift) your awareness back into the room—notice your breathing, a pleasant scent, the music you may be playing, or a pleasant (or benign) body sensation even if it's small. Now be present with *this* for forty-five seconds, or as long as you need before returning back to the child.

Repeat this process. You can continue this process until your alarm sounds, or for as long as feels tolerable to you today.

Close the practice. Now slowly return to the present time. Feel the support of the chair or floor beneath you, take a gentle breath in and out, then slowly open your eyes. Take your time to reorient to the room, note today's date, your age, and your location. Choose two grounding practices to complete today's practice.

Tuck in for today. Decide where the child's object belongs for now—kept with you, placed somewhere nearby, or tucked away safely for today. Let the child know this is not dismissal; it's a contained place to rest until you meet again.

Journal after the exercise. Within a few hours of your practice, journal using three of the following prompts of your choosing:

- Did connecting with this child part bring up memories or images you hadn't considered in a while?
- What emotions arose during or after the practice?
- What did you notice in your body during or afterward (emotions, body sensations, a posture, an energy)?
- What specific or general thoughts did you notice during or after the practice today?
- Did working with this child part change how you view your story (or her place in it) in any way?
- Which protector parts hovered nearby? What might have worried them? How did you respond to them?
- When might you connect with a child part again? What draws you to this practice?
- What hesitations also arise for you or a protector part regarding this practice?

Healing isn't just about understanding your pain—it's also about connecting with the parts of you that have carried it. Your wounded and waiting child parts are not just echoes of the past; they're diligently holding some essential (even if painful) stories of your life. By now recognizing them, learning their language, and offering them gentle and attentive space, you continue to create a foundation for your deeper healing. Although this will not be quick or linear, each thoughtful step really does change you inside—beginning with some really important trust-building.

Key Points

- The pain and unmet needs of child parts often drive feeling stuck and fuel protector part activation.
- Humans tend to have four core fears—loneliness, powerless, lack of access to essential resources, and annihilation. When triggered the pain of our child parts activates.
- The wounded child holds the unfiltered truth of the past—raw fear, shame, grief, and powerlessness—which show up in emotions, images, sensations, and body cues. This child part needs recognition and compassion, not disdain, suppression or quick coping tools.
- The waiting child holds longing and unmet needs—safety, support, justice, being seen and known, fun and play—and lives in hope and expectancy. Grieving these longings, and being curious about options now, supports important growth and healing.
- Meeting child parts with patience and their specific language loosens blocks, calms protectors, strengthens engager parts, and shows us what still needs healing.
- Widening the gap between triggered child and protector parts lets you assess needed healing, not just activate quick self-protection.

PART 3

Parts Work: Building Your Relationship and Synthesizing the Healing

Chapter 8

Learning the Unique Language of Your Nervous System

You're learning that the parts of the brain and nervous system most impacted by trauma work very differently than do the parts that use logic, self-reflection, planning, and conscious behavior choices. If only our deep hurts could heal by simply telling our story, developing better insight, and making new decisions. If only…

But this is often why trauma survivors still feel stuck even after doing good therapy—because specific parts of the brain and nervous system still haven't gotten the message—literally! Therefore, to more fully recover from childhood trauma, we *must* also work with the deeper nervous system—using the particular language *our self-parts* understand (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Lanius, Paulsen, and Corrigan 2014; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schwartz and Sweezy 2019; van der Kolk 2014). One way to do this is through a tool called SIBAM.

SIBAM: A Language for Your Right Brain and Embodied Nervous System

SIBAM (Levine 2010) is a tool that guides our work with the deeper, more rudimentary parts of the nervous system (where old trauma issues activate inside). SIBAM is an acronym where each letter represents a different way the nervous system processes our experiences—both ordinary and traumatic. The letters of SIBAM stand for *s*ensations, *i*mages, *b*ody and *b*ehaviors, *a*ffect, and *m*eaning-making. Let's take a closer look at each of these five elements.

Sensations

Sensations may be one of the most powerful ways to access, and then work with, a nervous system affected by trauma (even though it is often overlooked by survivors and even therapists unfamiliar with this work).

When we focus on body sensations—both obvious and subtle—we get to see what *immobilized* during the trauma. We see not only how much these still shape our life but also what remains unprocessed in our nervous system.

The tricky part about working with body sensations is that they don't usually come with a clear story or explanation. They don't always make sense right away (or ever), so we can't analyze or think through them. That's why many people—including experienced clinicians—often skip working with body sensations. But sensations in the body are wonderful breadcrumbs, offering clues to what needs healing, or what is blocking our growth.

What exactly do we mean by sensations? Sensations are the *physical experiences* we feel *inside our body*, whether in everyday moments or during intentional healing work. Sensations can include feeling antsy, blah, blank, blocked, bubbly, buzzy, calm, cluttered, cold, congested, constricted, dead, dull, empty, exhausted, faint, fast,

fiery, flat, flowing, fluid, frozen, gooey, gross, heavy, hot, jittery, loose, meh, nauseous, numb, open, pain, pounding, powerless, radiating, racing, raw, relaxed, searing, shaky, sharp, shivery, slow, soft, sore, spacey, spacious, spinny, still, stiff, stuck, tense, thick, tight, tired, tingly, warm, weary, wobbly.

Identifying sensations gives us a way to explore inner experiences that can be tough to talk about—or have no clear story. In fact, whenever we feel stuck in our healing work, we can always turn to our inner sensations—pleasurable, difficult, or even benign. Sensations are an excellent jumping-off point, letting healing directions arise organically. Working with sensations is a wonderful reminder that we don't need to understand something to heal it.

Imagery

Imagery can naturally appear in the mind—in everyday life or during trauma work.

Imagery elements can take different forms. They can be clear or hazy, literal or abstract, make sense or be confusing, or activated consciously or spontaneously. They can show up as mental photographs or visual memories, or short mental movies or visual flashbacks. They might be a symbol or metaphor, a fuzzy mental scene, a remembered dream, or even a detailed fantasy. Some images come with sounds or scents while others seem quite simple or isolated.

Imagery offers powerful clues—showing us specific experiences that have been especially impactful (even if we're not sure why). Images are our nervous system's way of talking to us through visual or metaphoric information.

Body and Behavior

Our bodies carry many imprints of unhealed trauma—they're a storehouse of experiences from our past. However, instead of slowing down to notice and listen in, we often rush to fix or change so-called

problem behaviors. But these behaviors can be important trauma remnants—highlighting attempts to remobilize, cope, or stay safe (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Maté and Maté 2022; van der Kolk 2014). As much as it's tempting to regard them differently, our behaviors are more than actions to be changed.

In SIBAM, the *B* stands for *behaviors*: the overt or very subtle actions we engage in, urges to move our body in certain ways, or the spontaneous positions or postures we make in everyday life or during healing work. Again, these behaviors can feel subtle, random, or ordinary, but during active healing work they can be useful to follow.

The *B*'s of behavior can include urges to stretch or physically shift; shake; take different body positions; stand up and move in some way; make a defensive posture; become aggressive; stay stiff or still, or curl up and fold in. This can also include tiny finger movements; toe tapping; turning or looking in certain directions; or different facial movements or expressions. Additional behaviors can include bending; being playful; binge eating; biting lips or cheeks; biting nails; bouncing legs; bracing toes; brow furrowing; burping; changing the subject; crossing body parts; crying; eyes hazing; eyes closing; eyes widening; falling asleep; frowning; gagging; holding the breath; jaw clenching; lying down; laughing; leaning to the left or right or back or front; lifting the feet; looking up; losing the voice; mind wandering; picking skin; pulling hair; purging; putting the head down; relaxing; rocking; sitting stock still or stiffening; sitting up; sighing; smiling; stimming; swaying; tightening fists; twirling hair; voice thinning; vomiting; wanting to go silent; wanting to make sound; wanting to stand; wiggling fingers; yawning; and zoning out.

Finally, the *B* in SIBAM also stands for the *body*, specifically *where* in the body other SIBAM elements seem to arise. For example, where in or around the body does an emotion, sensation, behavior or even just a felt presence of something activate? We learn to observe these with curiosity and pacing instead of judgement, analysis, or an impulse to quickly change them.

Affect

The A of SIBAM stands for *affect*, a fancy term meaning our feelings or emotions. Again, these emotional clues can show us what still needs healing—or what we need to grow or feel more comfortable experiencing. Like the other elements of SIBAM, our emotions can show up as strong or subtle, or clear or confusing. However they arrive, it's important to work with them with a gentle curiosity to see where they might lead us.

There are many emotions that arise in everyday life as well as during active healing work. These can include anger, boredom, calm, confusion, contentment, compassion, disappointment, disgust, fear, frustration, grief, happiness, hurt, joy, loneliness, nervousness, pride, rage, sadness, shame, shock, terror, and worry, to name a few.

Meaning-Making

Meaning-making, that process of making logical sense of something, activates from the top-left and front parts of our brain—it helps us reflect, analyze, understand, and plan. When we engage in meaning-making during healing work, we explore our stories (or narratives), learn new insights and understandings, and develop a clearer context for the abuse and its impact. Here, we might also connect to new ideas, identify patterns, or consider new behaviors.

Meaning-making is the SIBAM element people tend to be most familiar with. In fact, it's where some traditional therapies often start…and even stay. But in trauma healing, it's important to reserve meaning-making for afterward—after we've spent time with our sensations, images, behaviors, and emotions for more organic processing. In fact, many trauma experts now agree that for more comprehensive trauma healing, therapy must integrate methods that go beyond working only with narratives, thoughts, beliefs, insights, and conscious planning or behavior change (Fisher 2017; Lanius et al. 2015; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Siegel 2012; Swart 2019; van der Kolk 2014). So, because meaning-making alone

cannot heal complex trauma, models like SIBAM become very helpful—because they help us work with *all* our unhealed trauma components, not just one or two.

Why SIBAM Helps

In the world of trauma healing, something called the *Adaptive Information Processing (AIP)* model is a helpful guide. Discovered by world-renowned EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) therapy and trauma expert, Dr. Francine Shapiro (2018), the AIP model describes how the nervous system naturally processes the different experiences we encounter in life.

When our AIP is functioning properly, different aspects of the brain and nervous system work together to process, resolve, and integrate life's many experiences—both positive and difficult (Kandel 2006; Levine 2015; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). It's why something upsetting that happened on Monday feels better and more resolved by Friday without a lot of intense intervention. Here, our AIP system has pruned away what we no longer need (the intense stress and upset), while keeping and properly integrating the information we do (our meaningful experiences or important life lessons). Therefore, our internal AIP is like a psychological immune system—supporting our inner landscape as we encounter life's ups and downs.

But when an experience is *overwhelming* to a nervous system, especially during the vulnerable period of childhood development, this internal AIP system can malfunction. Here, encoding clear memories and information about the event can glitch, causing trauma elements to split off into fragments—different sensations, images, body experiences, and emotions (Levine 2015; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Perry and Szalavitz 2017; Shapiro 2018). These trauma fragments then hijack the nervous system, coming back to us in dis-integrated bits—and with limited context or understanding (Levine 2010; Frewen and Lanius 2015; Goleman 1997; Maté and Maté 2022; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014).

Lynn's Story

Lynn was learning how her trauma-based SIBAM fragments still activated even in simple life moments. For example, whenever Lynn's son would slam their back door, the loud, sudden thud echoed deep in Lynn's chest (sensation). Next, a visual flash of her friend's childhood bedroom and the shadow of someone coming in (image) would arrive. Lynn's heart would race, her breathing would shallow, and a tight and cold prickle would spread over her arms (body). At the same time, Lynn would become frozen and still (behavior), unable to turn toward her son or call out. She'd then feel a mixture of terror and rage (affect) even though she normally felt safe with her son. Finally, Lynn's understanding (meaning-making) seemed without context. She couldn't put together why her son's lumbering ways made her feel like something bad was going to happen. Even as she began to make logical sense of this, it still didn't stop these fragments from continuing to activate.

In the next two chapters, we'll explore working with your SIBAMs—but for now you're welcome to lean into the following: SIBAM's more (w)holistic approach will help you do more comprehensive healing work. Not only will you better process old trauma material, but you'll be able to use SIBAM to grow other parts of yourself. You might also notice some new left-brain understandings showing up more organically as you work with your SIBAMs (Levine 2010; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014).

Getting Acquainted with SIBAM

Each day for the next seven days, you can plan two ten-minute sessions to begin learning to work with your SIBAMs. This will likely be a new way of working with your nervous system. But as you stay with this process, you'll grow the skill of noticing, and better engaging, each of these different elements inside. As well, because you're probably pretty good at the meaning-making

part of SIBAM (i.e., analyzing, focusing on the trauma story, creating theories and explanations, trying to make change, and so on), I'm inviting you to focus primarily on the *S*, *I*, *B*, and *A* components of SIBAM for just now. We can leave the *M*'s for later.

Below are the guidelines for this exercise. There is also a guided audio version available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132 and a downloadable SIBAM sheet to support you throughout this week.

Your practice:

Settle in. Enter your comfortable, quiet space, and ensure you won't be disturbed. You can add any comforting elements to the space including soothing music, pleasing scents, soft lighting, or objects you find grounding.

Ground and pace. Choose two grounding or pacing exercises from chapter 2 to help your nervous system enter today's practice.

Choose your target. Choose an issue or starting target that is pleasurable, neutral, or even somewhat difficult (but no more than a 5-out-of-10 distress level for now). This could be a stressful experience from today or this week, an issue your body is currently dealing with, a person or animal that feels pleasing to you, a memory of a place or location that's meaningful, a special object that brings you comfort, a general inner state you're simply noticing right now, or how something in the room (a picture, a form of décor, a song, a loved animal) impacts your nervous system in a positive or difficult way.

Set your timer for ten minutes and notice. With eyes open or closed, gently bring your attention to your chosen target and begin to just notice *one* SIBA element that activates from your target (try to do this without judgement, analysis, or trying to make anything happen).

Some questions to guide this can include:

- In what part of my body (specific or general) does this SIBA seem to active just now?
- How much physical space does it seem to take up inside a part of my body just now?
- What is its level of intensity (out of 10)?
- Does it have movement about it or is it stock still (or does it seem to want movement of some kind)?
- What is its speed—fast, a balanced pace, or very slow?
- Does it have a mood or a feel about it?
- Is it generally pleasing or somehow uncomfortable?

As best you can, maintain your observing stance for ten to twenty seconds as you work with this element.

Pendulate. Now, shift your attention to something different—for example, the feeling of your feet on the floor, the rhythm of your breath, the presence of the support beneath you, a sound in the room, a little bit of light entering your eyes or eyelids. Allow this for approximately thirty to forty-five seconds. Then, pendulate back to your starting target and the SIBA element it activates just now. Observe for another ten to twenty seconds.

Continue tracking what unfolds. Sometimes more than one SIBA element will show up at the same time (e.g., a sensation of heaviness in your chest while a body part is clenching; a feeling of sadness in your gut with a sensation of zoning out; a desire to pull in your shoulders while imagining an old friend, and so on). If so, just allow your attention to notice one element at a time—whichever you choose, or whichever seems to get your attention more.

Domino-ing SIBA elements. You might also notice different SIBA elements activating one after another (e.g., a feeling of

lightness in your upper back leads to an image of the sun; a feeling of sadness in your chest leads to an urge to lower your head; the urge to lower your head leads to a sensation of dread, and then an image of your father, and so on). If so, that's okay and it's often how the process naturally unfolds. But for now, just return to the original SIBA you were tracking and give it ten to twenty seconds of your awareness before pendulating back. As well, if your nervous system seems good at activating *only difficult* SIBA elements, for now just chose targets that activate (even very) gently pleasant or benign SIBAs. You can move into more difficult SIBAs a little later.

Meaning-making. When judging, analyzing, fixing, urgency, or distraction show up (and they will!), simply return to the last SIBA element (from your target) that you were tracking, and continue. You can also choose to notice and sit with a sensation, image, body element, or emotion that seems to activate *with* that meaning-making element (e.g., the urge to analyze and fix your feeling of sadness produces an *image* of your frustrated mother, or a *sensation* of urgency in your chest). Therefore, whatever SIBAs activate *with* the meaning-making can be noticed and then tracked using this process.

Communicate with your SIBA element. To help you stay objective and observant with a SIBA element, it can help to say to it, "I see you. There is no judgment here. I'm simply noticing and tracking the aspects of you in this moment. Take your time. There's space for you here."

Optional journaling or drawing. If it helps, instead of sitting with your SIBA element(s) mentally, you're welcome to draw or write them out instead. Sometimes, making this process more concrete helps to slow it down, making SIBA-tracking a little easier. To do this, you can draw an outline of your *body* and mark where and when you feel something inside. You can also write down arising *sensations* or *emotions*, or sketch an *image* that activates during a SIBA round.

Close your practice. When the timer sounds or you're feeling finished for now, gently shift your attention away from your most recent SIBA element, and back to something neutral or pleasing in the here and now. Take your time.

Tuck in. With each SIBA element that arose today, use the tuck-in exercise from chapter 2. You can also do one grounding or pacing activity to end the practice for today.

Understanding the unique language of your traumatized nervous system isn't about assessing what's wrong with you. It's about learning to consciously listen to and be with the different elements and experiences your nervous system has been showing you. You're making safe and controlled space for these (vital) inner elements to now be safely seen and heard—not just analyzed, fought-through, replaced, or even scorned. This is such an important part of comprehensive healing because it helps your AIP better integrate old trauma material (Fisher 2017; Grant 2020; Levine 1997 2010; Parnell 2013).

Finally, and very importantly, through this process you're learning to offer yourself something that was likely missing after the trauma—a gentle and patient *witness* (you) to finally offer your SIBAMs safe presence. You're learning to become that capable adult that you (and your nervous system) needed all those years ago. As world renowned trauma expert Gabor Maté reminds us, children are not just hurt by an event; they are deeply hurt by being left alone with that event (Benazzo and Benazzo 2021).

This is why true validation really does change everything.

Key Points

- Trauma impacts the nervous system in ways that talk therapies, logic, or behavior-based therapies alone so often can't.
- SIBAM creates a pathway for deeper and more complex integration, helping trauma fragments be seen and integrated into a fuller story. Slowness, pacing, and gentle and nonjudgemental observation helps process different SIBAM elements.
- Meaning-making can arrive more organically when other SIBA elements are worked with initially.

Chapter 9

ALOW

Pairing SIBAM with the ALOW Technique

In chapter 8, we answered the question of why SIBAM helps with deeper healing. In this chapter, we'll answer another important question: Once our SIBAM elements are activated inside, what do we do with them? How do we help them better mobilize, process, and integrate? This is where the ALOW process comes in.

ALOW is an acronym that stands for *a*ttune, *l*ocate, *o*bserve, and *w*elcome, and these four steps pair beautifully with SIBAM. That's because ALOW specifically guides your work with the SIBAM elements that emerge for processing. And although I created this particular acronym, it's rooted in well-established mindfulness practices (Kabat-Zinn 2013; Levine and Frederick 1997; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015).

When we skillfully pair SIBAM with ALOW, three important aspects of healing can happen: discharging and completing the defensive responses that had to immobilize during trauma; improving AIP functioning to better integrate old fragmented trauma elements; and finally having a patient and curious witness (you) to validate trauma elements that have long been unacknowledged.

The Functions of ALOW

Let's take a closer look at each element of the ALOW process.

Attune

When you attune to something, it means that you're turning your attention toward it and staying with it just as it is. You slow down and simply notice it *without* judging, analyzing, or trying to change or control it. Instead, you offer your present-moment attention, letting it show itself to you *as it is*.

Whatever you're attuning to, the key is to do so with patience and curiosity, letting it unfold naturally. It's like saying to an aspect of yourself, "I see you, it's okay, you can be here, please take your time."

One of the coolest things I've learned in my years as a therapist is the impact of attunement on the growth of brain. In fact, many trauma and developmental experts agree that attunement—whether offered by another person or inward toward the self—can help calm the fear and stress centers in the brain while enhancing vital functions of the prefrontal cortex (that mature part of the brain that helps us access our window of tolerance and engager parts!). All of this helps the brain and embodied nervous system slowly regulate, heal, and continue to develop (Siegel 2007, 2020; Schore 2005; van der Kolk 2014). That's how powerful the A of ALOW can be.

Locate

Locating involves noticing where in (or around) your body you notice a particular aspect of SIBAM. Questions to help with this include: *Where do I specifically (or generally) feel this in my body in this moment? Is it in a particular body part or does it have a more general presence—more in the top half or bottom half; the left side or the right? Is it completely inside my body, or even a little outside? How much space in (or around) my body does this SIBAM element take up just now?* The

beautiful thing about these questions, and their answers, is that they don't have to make logical sense. All you have to do is simply notice its location—just where it's active right now.

Observe

Once you've attuned to a SIBAM element, and located its specific (or general) body location, it's then time to observe its behavior. Observing can take some practice because we're often trained to quickly figure things out, or change them to make new things happen. But, again, true observing is about slowing your focus and letting a particular SIBAM element be here without agenda.

Questions to help with observing include: *As I observe this SIBAM element, does it move in any way, or is it stock-still? Does it have a particular feel or vibe about it, or does it feel more benign? Does it like being noticed or is it more remote and aloof? Do other SIBAM elements seem to activate with it—a sensation, image, emotion, body posture or behavior?*

A useful analogy to help you observe your SIBAM element is to imagine that you are a researcher in a lab. Imagine you're studying (in other words, simply observing) this SIBAM element in its natural habitat. Like a researcher, you wouldn't bang on the glass, quickly judge or analyze your subject, or even try to make it behave in some way. You would simply slow down and observe it *as it is*. That's what you're doing here.

Welcome

Once you've attuned to, located, and begun to observe your SIBAM element, it's now time to welcome it. Welcoming doesn't mean you have to like this element, understand it, or offer it permission to stay this way forever. But, again, *for this moment* in time, you're saying to it (silently or aloud), "You are welcome here right now. I'm just going to be with you as you are in this moment. Take

your time. I come in peace." Although pacing is important here, welcoming can be a powerful part of healing because it teaches you to bring patience, openness, and curiosity to something that has likely been feared, dismissed, or distained since the trauma.

Welcoming (again, with proper pacing) gives your SIBAM element a soft place to land, without urgency, avoidance, judgment, or scorn. And because healing needs slow space and time, welcoming creates these conditions too.

Case Study: Li

Let's look in depth at Li's story to see how SIBAM-ALOW helps healing.

Li's Background

Li is the daughter of immigrant parents who themselves endured a life of trauma— terrible childhood poverty, neglect, and horrific cultural conflict. Because their own traumas remained unhealed, it deeply affected their parenting of Li. And although they worked hard to give her life staples, emotional warmth and understanding weren't offered. Li learned quickly that her parents were easily overwhelmed—so Li coped by becoming hyper-independent and telling herself that her needs shouldn't matter.

When Li was fifteen, she went to a party with a good friend from another school. Initially, Li enjoyed chatting and dancing, but as the night wore on, things began to shift. Li started to feel really odd and detached even though she'd had only one beer. While searching for her friend to get some support, Li hazily entered a back room in the house. It was there that Li was overpowered by three boys, and then held down and raped.

Left alone in the room after the assault, Li slowly became more coherent. Still unable to find her friend anywhere, Li left the party alone.

Although she was confused, sore, and humiliated, Li never told anyone about the assault—not her friend, not her parents, and not even her doctor when Li went for testing afterward. Li told herself to just forget what happened and focus on the other things in her life—so that's exactly what she did.

In her late twenties, Li tried some different therapies hoping to calm persistent anxiety and "some pretty dark funks". And, when really overwhelmed, Li used self-harming to cope, or would push herself through intense workouts and eating rituals.

Li also carried a confusing but deeply felt belief that, somehow, she just didn't belong in the world. And while she knew it wasn't logical she often saw herself as cowardly, weak, and chronically undeserving. Li just couldn't shake the heavy shame that followed her everywhere she went.

Li began wondering if the rape played some role in this, but she still wasn't sure because that night felt so fragmented. Moreover, the haziness that accompanied the assault made Li wonder if healing would even be possible for her. Her therapist reassured Li that it was.

Li's Therapy

After she developed more solid grounding and pacing skills, and a steadier daily routine, Li was introduced to the SIBAM-ALOW process. Although she was curious, Li still worried that her fragmented memories would make healing difficult. Li was reassured that vivid and detailed memories *weren't* necessary to proceed with trauma healing. In fact, Li learned that the SIBAM-ALOW process works beautifully with what experts call *implicit memories*—memories that aren't consciously recalled but instead show up as impressions, feelings and sensations, and somatic (body-based) experiences. During trauma, even very early trauma, these elements of experience still encode in (and affect) the nervous system (Fisher 2017; Lanius, Vermetten, and Pain 2011; Levine and Frederick 1997; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schore 2003, 2009). In fact, these implicit types of memories often show up as SIBAM elements after

unhealed trauma (Levine 2010; Fisher 2017; Ogden and Fisher 2015). This is why SIBAM-ALOW is so important when pursuing deeper trauma healing.

Learning about this became a turning point for Li. She was beginning to understand that her nervous system still remembered—even if her thinking mind did not. Li felt hopeful knowing she could start her trauma work from right where she was.

Li's SIBAM-ALOW Session

Let's visit Li's first SIBAM-ALOW session, as Li's therapist starts with a check in.

Li reports feeling a sense of nervousness moving through her body, and a slight trembling in her fingers. Li also notices a "funny pressure" behind her eyes, and a mild urge to "get up and leave the office." Although this is normalized and Li wants to continue, this becomes the material that opens the session.

Interval 1: Before moving into deeper trauma work, Li is asked to choose a grounding exercise to start. Because of the hyper-arousal Li already feels in her body, she chooses to do some fire breathing—targeting the sensation of nervousness in her chest and stomach. Together, Li and her therapist do five rounds of breath, then pause. Li is asked to notice if any pleasing SIBA (saving the M for later) elements have arisen from the fire breathing. Li reports, "I feel a kind of buzz in my chest…but underneath it, something is slowing down. My lower belly feels warmer and heavier now. It's kind of nice."

Interval 2: To anchor in this feeling, Li is asked which of these SIBAs she particularly likes just now. Li states she likes "that slow warmth" sensation in her belly and is curious about strengthening it. Therefore, Li applies the ALOW process to this sensation for a twenty-second interval. During this, the therapist sees Li's shoulders slightly dropping and a very gentle smile beginning on her face.

Interval 3: Li reports these pleasant sensations in her belly continue. Her therapist asks if an image might also accompany these. Li is quiet for a moment, and then says, "I see an image of a bright yellow sun; it has the same slow and warm sensation as my belly. I'm also noticing that warmth now moving up into my chest a bit." Li uses ALOW with these new SIBA elements, allowing her nervous system to further strengthen and enjoy this anchoring experience.

From this more regulated place, Li now feels ready to start exploring some trauma processing. Li is reminded that the SIBAM-ALOW process is meant to go slow and make space for the SIBAM elements that show up. Overwhelming Li's nervous system with speed, or many SIBAMs at once, is never a goal in this work.

Li is also reminded that pendulating will be an important part of this process. Therefore, the therapist will coach Li to pendulate back to her anchor if material begins to feel too intense or too fast—or if she needs a break. Pendulating will also help Li's nervous system practice re-regulating, instead of becoming stuck in only states of distress once they activate (Dana 2018; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006).

Interval 4: To ensure proper pacing, the therapist reminds Li to start with *one small component* of the rape trauma that has a maximum distress level of 6 out of 10. Li is also reminded not to start with the worst or most intense part of the trauma, and that this may not be necessary (or even advisable) to heal trauma.

Li is quiet for a moment and then states, "I don't know why, but three starting targets are coming to mind: when the roofie kicks in and I start to feel disconnected, the initial shock of being grabbed by those men in that room, and feeling really alone without my friend there afterward." With support and pacing considerations, Li decides to start the work with this last target memory.

Interval 5: To activate this target, Li's therapist asks what SIBA element (again, Li is good at rationalizing, so they agree to save M's for later) becomes most noticeable as Li remembers being really alone afterward. Li presses her hand to her sternum and says, "There's a

heavy, sinking sensation right here. It's like a knot…not painful, but dense and empty at the same time. It actually looks like a dark, bottomless hole." Of all these different SIBA elements, the sensation of emptiness paired with the image of the hole are most noticeable to Li just now—even though she's not sure why. Li begins to ALOW these paired SIBA elements just as they are.

Interval 6: After twenty seconds, the therapist checks in. "What are you noticing? What SIBA elements seem to be getting your attention just now?" Li replies, "I see a light coming up through that dark hole, but it's not comforting like the light from my sun anchor. This light feels almost imposing or angry." Li reports this as a 6-out-of-10 intensity and feels able to tolerate this. Li ALOWs this image and the feeling of its angry and imposing energy for the next twenty-second interval.

Interval 7: Li begins to stiffen. "That light is the one that I stared up at while those guys were on top of me. I remember it kept buzzing and flickering." Li's therapist asks if other SIBA elements arise with this as well. Li reports that, along with the image of the light, her body is now stiff and still, with a sensation of panic taking over in her chest.

The therapist suggests pendulating back to Li's anchor. She wants Li's nervous system to reconnect to something tolerable and soothing. Although wanting to push through, Li agrees and takes a drink of her water. With support, Li reconnects with her warm sun and the pleasant SIBAs it offers her. Once this is active in Li's nervous system, she ALOWs it for three twenty-second rounds.

Interval 8: As Li's body gently softens, her therapist once again checks in. Li reports that she feels a 4-out-of-10 warmth in her chest; the image of her sun feels present and comforting. Li ALOWs this for another twenty seconds.

Interval 9: As they now re-enter the trauma work, Li remains curious about the buzzing, flickering light. As they return to this

image and continue to ALOW it, the fingers on Li's right hand begin to twitch. Li's therapist asks if Li notices this. Although she hadn't, Li is now curious. She decides to orient to this particular body movement, and ALOW it for twenty seconds.

Interval 10: Li reports a "weird sense" that her right arm "wants to move up and down." Li's therapist coaches her to do this slowly and purposely without analyzing it. She reminds Li to stay curious and observant. The next ALOW interval begins.

Interval 11: Li's right arm and fingers become still. She reports that both arms are suddenly "super heavy and tired." Li very subtly slumps back in her seat and now appears to zone out. The therapist asks Li to become curious about that. Li attunes to the heaviness in her arms and the "zoning out" sensation in her head behind her eyes. She ALOWs this for twenty seconds.

Interval 12: At the next check-in, Li states, "My arms feel really weighed down, like I couldn't move them even if I wanted to. My body sort of feels this way too. I feel like I'm too heavy to move or even say words. I feel really lethargic, and I'm really zoning out." Li and her therapist recognize this as a shutdown response and suspect it's coming up for processing. Because Li's self-observation ability is still online, and she also feels able to tolerate this, Li applies a twenty-second ALOW to these two sensations.

Interval 13: Before her therapist can check in, Li states, "This actually feels like shame, like a gross, thick fog crawling over me." Li is asked about its location in her body in this moment. "My neck and face…like I just want to hide. I feel exposed. I see this thick, gooey cloud all around my head."

Because a number of SIBA elements are activating, Li is coached to mentally step back. She's invited to slowly notice which SIBA most gets her attention just now. Li states, "I don't know why, but it's that feeling and image of shame near the front of my head." Li feels able to be with these elements and ALOW them just as they are.

Within a few seconds, Li quietly whispers, "I see you. I know you are shame. I'm going to observe you from here. Take your time."

Interval 14: Li opens her eyes and looks at her therapist. "It's gone… like, poof. I don't feel anything now. Everything feels blank." Because Li may be dissociating or needing a break, she is offered some water and is asked to pendulate back to her anchor. As she reconnects with her sun and its pleasant SIBAs, Li spontaneously shares, "Sometimes when I'm either overwhelmed or numb, I'll stand in warrior pose. I like the feel of that pose; it's my favorite part of yoga class."

Li agrees to stand up and gently move into this pose to simply notice what happens. As she does, she observes a bit of "nice" energy "coming up through my middle body." Li's therapist then asks if her warrior pose could be paired with Li's anchoring sun—seeing what SIBAs might activate then. As she experiments with this, Li notices, "My body likes this. I see my sun cocooning me while I'm standing in warrior. I feel a bit steadier and a little more powerful." Li ALOWs these three SIBAs for a twenty-second interval. "My head is starting to feel lighter and clearer, especially behind my eyes."

Interval 15: As Li enjoys this, she also notices a faint agitation, and her right-hand fingers begin to gently fidget. As she attunes to this shift, Li says "I'm not sure why, but my right hand wants to move; it wants to flick or push."

Li is coached to follow this urge and to do so in that very slow and mindful way. As Li continues to repeat this movement, she suddenly states, "It's like I'm trying to push someone away or off of me." Li continues, "This is so weird. How is this happening? Is this my nervous system wanting to fight back?"

Although wanting answers to these questions make sense, they agree to save meaning-making for later in the session. Li slowly continues with the pushing movements, offering it ALOW as she does. The therapist reminds Li that her body may want to feel some of the movement it couldn't that terrifying and incapacitating night. She

also reminds Li that her sun can be here to support Li through these remobilizing actions. With this, Li's eyes moisten as she continues.

Interval 16: Li's hands drop and she looks perplexed. "I feel a bit lighter but I'm actually starting to get pissed off. Who the fuck does that to someone?! Like, who?! It's completely psychotic! Ugh, but…I don't know what to do with this."

Because her submit protector has been so dutiful throughout her life, Li is not used to mobilizing her rage. And the therapist doesn't want this new feeling to overwhelm Li's nervous system by coming out all at once. As they slowly and gently experiment with different options, Li likes the idea of vocal toning this anger. "I feel like I have words but I don't know what they are or how to let them out. So, I'm going to let them be just sounds."

Li and her therapist try different tones and volumes that "feel right" for her anger just in this moment. Some sounds feel good when they're low and growly, then others feel right when they become higher-pitched and abrupt. After seven rounds of toning, Li reports feeling better and more present. She sits again, takes some breaths, and drinks some more water.

Interval 17: After a period of rest, they attune back to Li's body. After a moment, Li says, "Something's coming to me about my dad. I just see an image of him…sitting in his chair that next morning. He's not looking at me or talking to me…even though I must look upset." After another pause, the M of SIBAM activates for Li as she has an insight about her father. "He's always so shut down. He's constantly disconnected. He's gone through a lot in his life." Li's therapist validates this insight: "Right. It was never about you personally. Your dad is so traumatized, he can't really engage…ever. That's about his trauma, not about you." Li slowly nods. Here, her therapist asks Li what SIBAs activate with this insight.

Interval 18: After a moment, Li says, "I'm not sure why, but a memory's coming. I'm in first-person perspective, and I'm five years old. I'm watching my parents fight in our kitchen." Li begins motioning

to the left side of her body, pointing to her father as if he were there in the office. Li is now having a body memory, feeling her own positioning when this event originally happened. Then Li states, "His face is really angry, and he keeps pushing into my mom. I want to run, but I'm worried—I'm scared he's gonna really hurt my mom. I can't move! Now, he's hovering over her, still pushing into her and making weird grunting sounds." Li's body begins to stiffen and brace, and her breathing stops. She looks to the therapist with wide eyes.

A new memory channel has begun to open—one separate from the rape—and many of its SIBA elements are flooding Li. Here, they pause, and the therapist reminds Li, "You're here in my office and you live in your adult body now." She invites Li to attune to this truth and the SIBAs it might activate. Li is able to feel some grounding and looks around the room to remind her nervous system she's no longer in her childhood kitchen. She slowly and purposefully ALOWs the bit of grounding this brings. Li wants to connect with her anchor as a part of this too.

Interval 19: To help Li mobilize some aspects of her family trauma, the therapist directs Li to her father in the office. The therapist asks, "Can you still sense him there, where you pointed a moment ago?" As Li nods, the therapist says, "Attune inside to see if your nervous system wants him here, or somewhere else." Li takes a moment and then states that she wants her father out of the building—she doesn't want him in her therapy space today. The therapist asks how they might do this. Li first wants to wrap him in a body cocoon. She then feels an urge to make swatting motions with her right hand—as if pushing her father toward the office window. She ALOWs ten slow and purposeful motions of this, then pauses and takes a deep breath. Li states, "Okay, he's outside now. That actually feels better." Li is then coached to ALOW the SIBAs of this better feeling that she now realizes is relief.

Interval 20: Because Li reports now feeling "about 70 percent" in her window of tolerance state, and the therapy hour is almost complete, the therapist suggests two grounding exercises of Li's choice.

Then they offer the tucking in exercise for the more intense SIBAMs that arose during the session today. This includes Li's wounded child part (from the kitchen), and her protector parts (fight, freeze-shut-down) that activated earlier. Li feels exhausted, but grounded and present, at a 7 out of 10.

Interval 21: Li and her therapist spend a few moments debriefing and making meaning of their first SIBAM-ALOW session. Li states, "That was crazy. I thought I'd have to go straight into the worst part of the rape to heal it. But starting with just one sensation from just one part of the memory...it's crazy where that led. I didn't even have to think about it. That stuff just came—stuff I'd even forgotten." Li also stated, "I can't believe that brought up that memory about my parents. I never really think about their fights, but there it was today. Maybe I need to process some of that stuff too. That blows me away."

Li's therapist agrees about the power of this process. "When we apply the language of SIBAM-ALOW, it gives us natural bread-crumbs to follow." Li agrees it's more organic than some other therapies she's used, and marvels at how the process naturally brings up what needs to mobilize. Li concludes, "It seems easier than trying to figure it out logically—I'm exhausted, but I do feel like something's shifted. I'm not sure what, or where it will go…but I do feel better. I'm still a bit hesitant, but now I'm also curious."

Li is reminded to use her grounding and coping when needed, and books her next appointment for the following week.

Your SIBAM-ALOW Process

After reading Li's story, you might want to experiment with the SIBAM-ALOW process yourself. As you do, there are a few important reminders. Before you start, ensure that your grounding and pacing skills are in place, and that your daily life routine is fairly steady. You'll also want to ensure you have a good anchor for pendulating during each session, and that your ALOWing intervals are

short (approximately ten to twenty seconds) for regular self-check-ins.

Pacing is vital here—it's important to choose starting targets that are not too intense, too distressing, or have a lot of complicating factors to them. In fact, for a while, you might use SIBAM-ALOW solely to strengthen more pleasant material. Remember, working with comfort is also part of healing because it helps to grow your window of tolerance (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Siegel 2007). This helps you connect with your adult and core selves — important allies throughout your healing work.

Finally, if you're using this process on your own, and your distress activates above a 6 out of 10, please set this aside, and reach out to a trauma-informed therapist with this kind of training to support you. I also recommend professional guidance if you experience a lot of dissociation, if you've been diagnosed with a personality disorder or other mental health issue, or if the material you're working with feels stuck or not properly processing. Not everything can or should be done independently, especially more complex childhood trauma. You are in charge of your pacing here—staying mindful of your well-being must always come first.

If all the above aspects are well in place, you can begin by experimenting with the following SIBAM-ALOW steps:

Your SIBAM-ALOW practice:

Gather your resources. There are some important worksheets to guide your SIBAM-ALOW process. These are important to support your pacing and correct practice. These include: the target selection sheet, the SIBAM list, and the ALOW process sheet. All are available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132. Printing these out and using them each time is strongly advised.

Prepare your space. Enter your safe and quiet space with any comfort elements you might like. Ensure that you won't be disturbed and that your timer is set for twenty to thirty minutes.

Ground and pace. Take your time to complete two grounding or pacing exercises of your choice. Ensure you feel regulated to at least a 7 out of 10 before starting.

Anchoring. Notice one or two calm or pleasing SIBAs that activated from your grounding or pacing. You can also choose an anchor from your life that regulates you (thinking of a cherished pet, a safe person who supports you, a calming place that is real or imagined, a pleasing picture or item in your space today, and so on). Use SIBAM-ALOW to anchor this in, not rushing but taking the time that you need. This will help you with pendulation when you need it during today's practice. Like grounding and pacing, the strength of your anchor should feel at least 7 out of 10.

Choose a starting issue or target. Your starting issue should not be an overwhelming trauma, one you've only recently experienced or uncovered, or one that is currently active in your life. Your target selection sheet can guide you here and should be used with each SIBAM-ALOW practice.

Choose your components. Once you've selected your target issue, you can now choose *one* specific component of that issue to start from. Your target selection sheet will also guide you with this.

Notice your SIBAM element(s). Once you've chosen one component of your target issue, notice one to two SIBA elements (save the M for later) that now activate. Your target selection sheet will guide you with this.

Begin to ALOW your starting SIBA element(s). With your eyes open or closed, apply the ALOW process to one activated SIBA element. Do this for approximately twenty seconds using your ALOW sheet as a guide if you need.

Self-check-ins for tracking. After each twenty-second SIBAM-ALOW interval, gently pause and do a self-check-in. Ask yourself,

What SIBAs am I noticing from this last interval? You can notice these mentally—or you can write them in your journal or on your SIBAM-ALOW tracking sheet (download at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132). Notice *only one or two* SIBA elements. Then offer these no more than thirty seconds of ALOWing (this prevents other material from coming in and flooding you). One or two elements per interval is the goal.

Continue. Repeat the last two steps if processing continues, and if it also remains tolerable to you. Remember to go slow. Give these elements time, space, and patience.

Pendulate. Return to your chosen anchor and its specific SIBAs for pacing, re-grounding, and rest when needed. Don't just push through. Ensure you take routine pendulation intervals—both for you and your nervous system. Remember, pendulation also is training your system to move in and out of material without getting stuck.

ALOW your parts. If any self-parts (protector, child, or engager) activate during an interval, you can connect with them in one of two ways: ask it to gently step aside for now, or invite it to be present so you can notice *its* SIBAs. For example, if a protector part tries to distract, freeze, or analyze, you can say, "I see you, I know you're just trying to help me. I'm okay. Please step aside and watch from the sidelines for now." If a child part activates with sadness or fear, you can notice these SIBAs and gently ALOW them. If an engager part activates, work with its helpful SIBAs, or invite it to support you from further away.

Work with old defensive impulses. If an urge to mobilize defensive action arises (e.g., through pushing, punching, blocking, turning, curling in, making sounds, speaking words, moving feet, making a running motion, bouncing, fidgeting, hollering, and so on), you can explore these *one at a time*, and in a very *slowed-down* (or slow-motion) way. You can do this through repeated *micro-movements* until the mobilized action feels

completed (or better) for now. Enacting (i.e., remobilizing) unfinished self-protection reactions, both *slowly* and *repeatedly,* lets your nervous system better register them. Here, you process and integrate them more thoroughly and without overwhelming your nervous system (Levine and Frederick 1997; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015;Payne, Levine, and Crane-Godreau 2015). Once complete, return to your anchor and offer it ALOW for some rest and re-grounding. You can then return to your trauma processing, or simply work with more comforting SIBAs.

Close your practice. When your timer sounds, or when you feel ready, return again to your anchor using SIBAM-ALOW. Next, tuck in the SIBAs that activated today, including all the self-parts that made an appearance—you can ask engager parts to stay with you if you like. Choose one or two grounding or pacing exercises to then close your practice for today.

Meaning-making. At the end of the session or within a few hours, you can engage in some meaning-making about today's practice. You can journal, using any of the following prompts to guide you: *What shifted as today's session went on? What surprised you most today? Which child part(s) showed up and when? Which protector part(s) showed up and when? What remobilizing seemed to activate in your body? How did any gentle mobilizing actions feel? Were there moments when you felt blocked or stuck? What happened when you ALOWed these particular SIBAs? Were you able to connect with one of your engager part(s)? How did this feel? What was it like to pendulate between tougher material and your anchor? Where did you end off today? Where might this lead for a next session? What insights or questions are you left with just now?*

Aftercare. Doing SIBAM-ALOW with a component of trauma can be tiring—emotionally, physically, and cognitively. You and your nervous system are doing a lot even if it may not seem like it. Therefore, offer yourself something really nice today: a short walk in a nice space, a favorite drink, a yoga class, a massage or body treatment, a favorite show, good music, special time for a hobby, a yummy treat, a visit with a good and safe friend, time with a cherished animal, or something silly and fun. You can even dedicate this self-care to the child you once were, and the parts of your nervous system that have helped you to cope. Never forget to take care of yourself, and all of the different parts of you inside.

Applying SIBAM-ALOW for Healing and Growth

We've explored SIBAM-ALOW for processing trauma, but you can use this process for other goals too: an engager part you want to strengthen; a good memory or experience you want to enhance; an element of a relationship you're struggling with; a feeling of connection you want to enhance (e.g., with a person, animal, or spiritual being); an aspect of yourself or a behavior that confuses you; an aspect of yourself you feel good about; a protector part you want to better understand; a child part you want to better explore; a body part or pain you routinely struggle with; a speed in your nervous system you want to strengthen or calm. There are so many ways to use SIBAM-ALOW. This process is here for you.

Key Points

- The ALOW process fosters curiosity, self-trust, and connection with different aspects of SIBAM, making healing feel more organic and possible.
- ALOW pairs beautifully with the SIBAM model to strengthen different resources, and process trauma elements. The SIBAM-ALOW process can reengage adaptive information processing (AIP), while building stronger connection with developing parts of self.
- Pendulating between trauma elements and a comforting anchor grows flexibility between states of upset and regulation.
- Slowly and mindfully repeating protective impulses (like pushing, kicking, blocking, running motions, and so on) can help them remobilize and finally complete—in a safe, well-paced, and more controlled way.

Chapter 10

Putting It All Together

Here we are. The last chapter. And, whether you've read this book cover to cover, in doable bits and pieces, or have rereading something a hundred times before it made more sense, that's all okay. Truly. You have done great here!

Finishing a book like this is not like finishing a regular book. It can leave you feeling stirred up, or hopeful, or excited, or tired, or relieved, or even confused. It might also leave you wondering…now what?

Reclaiming What Comes Next: The Cycle of Healing

Sometimes, after experimenting with something new, you stand at a crossroads for a bit. One path says, "Put the book away. You've done enough for now. Maybe come back to it later. Or maybe not." The other path says, "Don't walk away from yourself. Not now. Take some time and find your pace. But let this continue to bring you movement. Something real is waiting for you."

It's okay (and really normal) if you feel a pull to both options right now. A part of you might feel ready (or ready enough) to continue on your healing path, while another part might feel wary, and want to drift away. And maybe that old urge to either go hard or shut down is also activating inside.

Because of this, this final chapter will offer you something important—not a rah-rah message to boost you up or convince you

of anything—but an invitation to pause and ask yourself, *Where do I really want to go from here, and what pace can I offer myself for just now?*

Healing from CSA is not linear, and it doesn't always have a final destination. Instead, it's a process with different segments and tasks that we enter at different points in time. In other words, we decide it's time to address something we feel ready (enough) for. We go inside and work with it a little (or a lot). Then, we pause, integrate what we processed, and rest. And soon, we begin the cycle again. This is healing trauma—it's how it works.

You may have even noticed this cycle as you've journeyed through this book. For example, you may have started by practicing foundational skills—grounding and pacing. Then you learned how the nervous system works both during and after trauma. You discovered and began to connect with some of your different parts inside, and you learned the very different language each of these speak. And you did this while experimenting with some new insights and exercises, likely taking needed breaks along the way.

Now all of this has brought you to this moment. With these skills—this new toolkit—you can customize your healing journey in the way that you want to move forward. Therefore, in this final chapter, let's talk about what comes next for you. Let's bring all of this together and integrate it into a specific healing practice you can offer yourself.

Your Healing Plan

Trauma healing can make you feel both hopeful and excited, but also hesitant and unsure. This is especially true if you're moving forward only with good intentions, or a more general or abstract healing plan in mind. Here, it will become easy to lose your footing, causing uncertainty, delay, and avoidance to develop. That's why structure, clarity, and predictable pacing are vital—and you'll use these to develop a plan to help you heal.

One way to do this is through a metaphor I call the stone path.

The Stone Path Metaphor

When doing a piece of healing work, the metaphor of the stone path can be very useful— because it gives you a template to properly assess and plan different aspects of your healing. Aspects like:

- Choosing the specific piece of healing work you're ready for
- The micro-tasks needed for this healing component
- The timing and pacing you'll need for each task
- The specific tools and processes required
- Signs that show you're making your desired progress

Think of your healing journey as a long and winding path made up of many round or square stones. This entire path represents your overall healing journey—the big picture of your recovery and your growth throughout life.

As you imagine this path, also notice its different sections or *segments*, each with a its own small *cluster of stones*. You can think of these segments as one chapter of your healing (or a healing sub-goal, if you like). Completing a healing segment will move you forward on your path, while also allowing the next healing segment to appear.

Finally, within each healing segment are *individual path stones*, each representing *one* healing task for that segment—a task that is clear, concrete, and manageable.

This stone path metaphor is so important because it breaks your healing journey into well-paced, doable pieces: individual healing tasks (each path stone), healing sub-goals (the segments—or clusters—of stones on the path), and your overall healing goal (the entire path itself). This will help you stay clear and on track, so the momentum of your work remains both balanced and healthy.

WORKING WITH YOUR STONE PATH: AN EXAMPLE

Let's say one of your overall healing goals is to respond to life primarily from your developing adult self—with less activation of your fight protector part. Let's also say you've noticed that your fight part really activates whenever you feel taken advantage of—echoing themes from your CSA.

In your marriage, this theme gets triggered (and then plays out) primarily through an unequal division of labor—household chores. Currently, when this issue comes up, it's your fight protector part that quickly takes over, using yelling, insults, and door-slamming as its tools.

One of your *overall* healing goals (as represented by your *entire stone path*) is to live routinely from your adult self. You want to do this in everyday life, and in challenging moments with others, like your partner.

In working toward this overall goal, you'll focus on *one segment* (one sub-goal made up of four specific stones) on your path:

- Slowing down your triggered hyper-aroused speed
- Feeling a little more empathy and compassion for others
- Staying present to listen to another person's perspective
- Demonstrating this through reflective statements and constructive communication during disagreements

Right now, one *healing task* (i.e., the one stone of the four) you've chosen to work on involves: slowing down your nervous system's hyper-aroused speed when disagreeing with your partner about household chores. For the next month, when such disagreements arise this one path stone's healing task will include:

- Reminding your partner that you're working on this healing goal
- Holding the symbol representing your adult self while asking yourself, *Which internal speed would the adult part of me feel right now?*

- "Borrowing" that speed, then attuning to its activating sensation in your body
- Strengthening the inner sensation of this adult pace through at least three rounds of ALOW
- Taking respectful breaks to use fire breaths (five rounds minimum) if your inner speed moves into the orange or red hyper-arousal zones

PLANNING YOUR PATH STONES

To help you experiment with the stones on your healing path, please visit http://www.newharbinger.com/57132. Here, you will find Jillian's story, and how she planned two path stone tasks for an important segment of her healing. You'll also find the stone path planning sheet that Jillian used, including helpful questions to guide your planning process. Print out your planning sheet and complete it by hand—do not do it mentally or just on a screen. Even with good intentions, this is a sure-fire way to lose track, become lost, and then feel defeated. Writing out goals, then keeping them visually handy, is a key to accomplishing the healing you need (Clear 2018).

The Resting Bench Metaphor

Every stone path must offer rest on the journey. One way to do this is by installing a resting bench. This metaphoric bench will become your cue to take respite and integrate the work from your different healing stones. You can create (mentally or in some visually concrete way) your resting bench with specifications that feel pleasing—traditional, unique, plain, fancy, off to the side, under a nearby tree, or somewhere in the distance you can still access. This bench is vital to your healing process—you are welcome to pace here anytime you need.

Visiting your resting bench is not a sign of avoidance. Rather, it offers the timing your nervous system needs. You might sit on your

bench for a few minutes during an exercise, or for a day or a week as you work one stone's task. You might even rest here for a season between stones or segments of healing that you're working through. You, and your adult or core self—and maybe your therapist—will decide when you're ready to return to your path.

It's important to remember that, after coping with trauma, taking rest (that's not about avoidance or shutdown) can feel pretty unfamiliar. You might want to be farther along your stone path, or believe that you can (or should) leap over some stones. Although this makes sense, it just can't be done. Each path stone is important and must be worked with. You're seeing that life's not *all in* or *all out*, so tools like your resting bench can help with this learning.

Six Experiences on the Healing Path

As we travel our path and experience some healing, certain experiences tend to arrive. These aren't necessarily signs that something needs retooling. In fact, they're often signs that mobilizing is happening. The problem is, if we don't recognize these experiences, we can misinterpret their meaning and become confused or discouraged. Therefore, identifying these experiences and normalizing their arrival will be an important part of your healing work.

Let's take a look at each.

Standing on the Bridge

There's this funny in-between stage of healing when something is shifting but hasn't quite taken root. It's like standing between two locations called *no longer* but *still not yet*. I call this experience *standing on the bridge*.

Standing on the bridge tends to happen when you've started a new healing task, or you've just completed one. You feel like you're

on the cusp of a change, but you're still not sure how it might play out.

Signs that you're on the bridge can include: feeling lighter or less reactive but still not sure who you're becoming; certain people no longer fitting in your life but unsure who might fit better; feeling safer seeking out an intimate relationship but years of not dating make this feel pretty uncertain; feeling ready to leave your toxic job but still unsure what you'd like to do instead.

Although being on the bridge can feel awkward and unclear, it's actually a natural place of pause. It's needed space for integrating, learning, and resting before the next steps arrive. It's not you being stuck, resistant, or stagnant—it's more like the period when winter turns to spring. Although the surface may still look bare, beneath, new seedlings are indeed taking root.

It's vital to know the difference between standing on the bridge and actually being stuck. When you're on the bridge, you might feel unsure, but also hints of anticipation and curiosity. When you're stuck, you feel different, like you're recycling old patterns—or nervous system states that feel frustrated and blocked. When on the bridge, you feel lighter and a little expectant. Feeling stuck is much heavier, sticky, and slow.

If you do find yourself at a place of stuckness, it's important to know that this isn't a failure. In fact, stuckness can mean you're bumping up against fear—because parts of you learned early that change can mean trouble. So, here, you acknowledge a fear is arising, which can even become your next segment of healing.

Big Swings

When we're healing and shifting into something new, what I call *big swings* often start to happen. These big swings show up when we're leaving something old, but we end up overshooting in the opposite direction. Here, you and your nervous system are seeking middle ground by first experiencing the other end of the spectrum.

Although this can feel confusing or even unsettling, during healing these big swings are common and natural (Heller and LaPierre 2012; Levine 2010; Schwartz 2021). Having functioned at one end of the spectrum to cope, you now overcorrect as your search for more balance.

Examples of big swings can show up throughout healing: never saying no to now saying it all the time; keeping everything private to oversharing with everyone; being emotionally shut down to now crying at phone commercials; never speaking your mind to joining three political movements.

If you have some big swings, please be patient with yourself. If you're overstepping a lot, you can let others know—while keeping a few apologies handy at this stage.

Thinking Along a Continuum

A main theme of this book has been about pacing—because healing isn't linear and there are stages to navigate. There will be times when you feel more solid and ready, while other times you'll need to pull back a little—or a lot. To better assess your needs in these periods, it can help to have something to give you perspective. Therefore, thinking of healing along *a continuum* lets you measure, balance, and choose your momentum.

A continuum is like a long and thorough slide rule; a scale to move along with different options and intensities. As you grow, you'll move away from rigid patterns and narrow limits (e.g., all-or-nothing thinking) while experimenting with greater flexibility and choice. Although some black-and-white responding might still be in play, you'll also being wondering about different shades of gray.

Here are some options healing continuums can give you:

- **Pacing.** How fast or slow will I move through a specific healing task (i.e., minutes, hours, days, weeks, or months)?

- **Intensity.** What intensity of each SIBAM element do I want to experience (e.g., 5 percent, 20 percent, 50 percent), and what tools can I use to stay in these limits?
- **Duration.** How long will I ALOW a SIBAM element before pendulating to my anchor (e.g., five seconds, ten seconds, twenty seconds)?
- **Target starting points.** During trauma processing of a specific event, where do I want to start in the memory (e.g., two days before, a few hours before, one hour after, one year after)? This continuum is important because processing a trauma doesn't need us to start with (or even go to) its worst point (Levin 1997 2010; Fisher 2017; van der Kolk 2014).
- **Distance.** During trauma processing, where do I want my mental perspective to be (e.g., seeing the memory from five feet away, from the ceiling or the sky, from down the street or another town, or even from a different planet)?
- **Connection.** What level of connection do I want with a particular person in my life just now (once per week, once per month, twice a year, preparing for no contact)?
- **Level of change.** How much change am I aiming for during an exercise, healing task, or healing segment (e.g., 5, 10, 30 percent)? What tools are needed to meet this percentage, and what benchmarks will signal that I have met it?

At http://www.newharbinger.com/57132, you'll find different continuums, as well as guiding questions to assess your different pacing options. You can download copies to ensure that they're handy as you work through your healing segments and tasks.

"At-The-Same-Time" Experiences

Before doing trauma work, your nervous system may have preferred fairly black-and-white certainties in life. In other words, you may have experienced life as really good or not okay at all, safe or threatening, exciting or boring and flat, or caring or dismissive. These hard-line feelings are quite common after CSA because traumatized nervous systems tend to like either-or realities—these help things feel simple and more tolerable in a world that has long-felt complex and confusing.

However, as healing continues, these firm edges tend to soften. In other words, seemingly opposite things now begin to coexist inside. I like to call these "at-the-same-time" experiences and, at first, they can feel confusing or even unsettling. That's because now, you might feel stress without being consumed by it; strong anger with less impulse to suddenly react; understanding for a friend who's made a hurtful mistake; or pride in your progress while still grieving what was lost.

Psychologists call this ambivalence "integration" (Fisher 2017, 2021; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014), and it's a sign that healing is happening. However, when integration arrives, it can take patience and even learning—not because something is wrong, but because your nervous system is experiencing a more complex way of being. It's important to know that as you progress, holding these "both-and" moments (e.g., mixed feelings, layered memories, contrasting truths, and co-activating self-parts) will become more natural and familiar to you, while offering you a more authentic sense of yourself.

Reevaluating Your Relationships

Healing can make you more discerning about who you share your time and healing with. As you shift and change, you might find yourself wanting (or needing) to pull back from the people you once

turned to. This is common in healing and, although not with everyone, it will likely happen with some in your life.

If you do feel this way, you don't have to end relationships suddenly, or even make plans to go no contact. But it does mean you might be getting better at assessing who can offer safe space, and those who cannot.

A permission that's helpful: You don't owe everyone your trauma story—because not everyone will be capable of holding it. And often, this is a reflection of where they're at in life, and not of your process or worthiness to change. In fact, this may be a part of reclaiming something vital: building reciprocal relationships with more capable people. Although bittersweet, such shifts are quite normal and can even foster your deeper healing goals.

Needing a Therapist

Some people make good progress on their own for a time, especially if they have good foundation and support. But for many survivors more complete healing must be done in the presence of a safe and skilled professional.

Many experts agree that the right kind of therapy—that's varied and highly trauma informed—can be a life-changing healing resource, especially for those who've had to go it alone (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schore 2012; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). A good trauma therapist understands the depth of CSA—not just on the mind but on the (developing) brain and nervous system. They understand the nuances of collaborative repair, and use a combination of mind and nervous system–based therapies (Fisher 2017; Lanius et al. 2015; Levine 2010; van der Kolk 2014).

If the idea of therapy feels overwhelming to you, that might be an important healing segment on your path (that, ironically, you can do in therapy). Being seen in vulnerability may be pretty new and scary, but it's not weakness, a burden, or giving up control.

You can research good clinicians, read about their approach, and even have a free consultation to decide. For many, this step is an important game-changer—a fundamental resource on their healing path.

Finally, it bears repeating: if you're new to this work, if your nervous system is good at dissociating, if your foundational skills or daily life routines are shaky, or you've been diagnosed with complex trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, a personality disorder, or a serious mental illness, do not do this work alone. Find a qualified therapist to help you.

A Final Word About Healing

It's really important for you to know that healing is *not* meant to dismiss the past. It doesn't excuse any of what happened, and it doesn't let anyone off the hook. Not at all. But sometimes our trauma can feel like a sacred monument; a marker of truth yet to be properly acknowledged. It can also serve as a familiar touchstone—a predictable hell versus an unknown freedom. And, in a strange way, holding onto trauma can feel safer—staying vigilant might mean we can't be hurt again.

After a relationship with trauma, these worries make sense—and many women have them as they stand at this crossroads. But these so-called secondary gains come at a huge cost: They keep you suffering. They keep you powerless. And they keep you forever stuck in the past. The life meant for you can't find its real footing. Who you are beyond trauma can't find the daylight.

So much of trauma healing is really about permission: Permission to just consider. Permission to gently imagine. And permission to listen to that deep echo inside—that beneath all the weight and the shit of the past, there is a part inside of you that stayed whole and intact. In fact, it's the part that brought you here…to holding this book. Because it's always hoping you will find your way home.

This is the quiet power of reclaiming what was lost. It's not loud, it's not instant, or even fully understandable. But it is real. And it wants to make sure that you know: you were never too damaged. It is never too late. You were not born to carry what someone put upon you.

So please know you are allowed to outgrow the trauma. Not because it didn't matter; and not because it's time to forget or move on. But because somewhere inside lives the *you* who was always—and right to this moment still is—meant to be.

Key Points

- The stone path is a metaphor for your overall healing journey, with paced segments of healing, and specific path stone goals.
- The resting bench is a reminder to pause, restore, and integrate. It is not failure, procrastination, or a sign of being stuck.
- Six common experiences along the healing path include: standing on the bridge, big swings, thinking along continuums, "at-the-same-time" experiences, reevaluating relationships, and needing a skilled therapist.
- Healing is not about erasing or excusing the past—it's about reclaiming your wholeness, and the life you were meant to live. You are not broken, and it's not too late. Reclaiming what was lost means coming home to yourself.

Conclusion

You've arrived at the final part of this book—the conclusion. Allow me to say, I'm truly proud of you. You've stayed with something important here. And, not just the new information or exercises in this book. You've also connected with places inside that you may not have visited for a while—or ever. So, here, you've done something really good for yourself—even if you've experimented with just one or two things. And when you revisit these pages (which I that hope you that will), you'll do it in a way that's unique to *that* time…and that will be perfectly okay.

Your commitment to this work also shows something else—that a fundamental truth is starting to take root. The truth that no matter what happened to you, there's a deep part inside that is *always* intact—and still imagines a life different from your beginnings.

Even if it doesn't feel like it yet, or other parts of you are still tangled and sore, please know this core of you remains untouched by trauma…and quietly sits inside waiting for you.

How do I know this part of you exists—this *always* part of you that you were born with inside? I know this from watching a new life begin—and the emergence of an inexplicable love that came with it. Let me explain.

Brady's Story

A number of years ago, I was invited into a very special moment. My dear friends were having their last baby, and they asked me to be in the delivery room. I don't have any children of my own so I'd never had this experience personally. But I was honoured and delighted to be there for my friends—and to witness baby Brady make his entrance into the world!

Having heard many stories of childbirth, I expected the labor to take a while—that we'd have lots of time to visit, be excited, and prepare for the baby to make his arrival. In fact, this was the case for my friends' first two boys, so we expected it to be the same with their third.

Were we in for a surprise! Brady left no time for preparatory rest, pain medication, or even small breaks between contractions. From the first labor pain to Brady's arrival was three hours in total! And he was a big fella—over ten pounds—the biggest of three brothers (and something Brady takes pride in!). However, because of this, Brady's mom endured horrific pain, while his dad (and his auntie) felt powerless throughout.

But then…something amazing happened. Brady finally arrived into the world. And with that, all the distress instantly dissolved, and the energy in the room became vastly different.

Brady's existence changed everything.

What I was witnessing was more than the relief of birth, or mother and baby being declared healthy. This was the arrival of a fierce and absolute love of two people meeting someone utterly unique—someone inherently special and whole, and already deeply and completely lovable.

What was so powerful about this moment was that Brady hadn't done anything yet—literally. He hadn't smiled or cooed. He hadn't spoken a word. He hadn't shown some unique ability to earn his worthiness. We knew nothing about Brady or who he'd become, or the different life paths he might eventually take. And, again, Brady's birth had been incredibly taxing; his parents had gone through significant stress. Yet, in a heartbeat none of that mattered. There was just pure delight in this one-and-only boy.

In the years since, we've told Brady his birth story—as well as his dad's first words to him. As he gently held Brady and gazed into his eyes, his dad proudly stated, "We love you, Brady. You are such a good boy."

I don't think I'll ever forget those words—you are such a good boy. Because they really were already the truth. Brady's dad didn't mean "you're good because you'll earn belonging in our family, or somehow prove your deservability, or because you'll never struggle or make important mistakes." He said these words because of something undeniable:

You are special and whole because you exist. You and your life matter just because you are you. This world is now different because you are here. And nothing that happens will ever change that.

In fact, had the nurse taken my friends down to the nursery and said, "Take your pick. They're all the same; tiny, bald, and crying," my friends would have chosen Brady without hesitation—because deep in their bones they know he isn't interchangeable. In the history of the world there has never been another Brady…and there never would be again.

And…

They get to love him.

They get to join his unique life.

They already know how lucky they are.

There was another experience after Brady's birth that showed how this can go awry.

Not All Will Learn They're Special

When Brady and his mom were moved to their suite, their roommate was a mother struggling to connect with her baby. As this newborn lay crying, her mother told visitors not to pick her up for fear of "spoiling her." We overheard her father say the pregnancy was unplanned, and how exhausted they felt at the thought of another child. Their tone throughout was dismissive and removed.

Although parents will undeniably make (many) mistakes, emotional neglect is a very different matter. So, as we listened to

these struggling parents, our hearts began worrying for their tiny baby. Because although she was already lovable and whole, she may not grow up to learn this about herself. And not because she had (or would develop) some game-changing flaw, but because this vital truth might be withheld from her. If her parents can't see their inherently good girl—they'll struggle to reflect this so she can see it too.

And should trauma also be in this little girl's future, her parents might fail to attune to her then. They might neglect to show her that no matter what, she will always be lovable—she will always be enough. That under her layers of pain and self-protection there is still that part of her that is whole and intact. This will be the truth about this little girl, but she won't learn to feel it… and that will change everything.

This story is important because it's *your* story too—because you were also born inherently good. This core part of you is *built into* your being. It is not created but *shown* to you. However, if this wasn't mirrored (enough) to you growing up—or after you experienced trauma from abuse—then just like those kittens, blind to horizontal lines, you won't learn to see it…and that will impact so much.

That's why true healing isn't only about insights, or developing skills, or processing trauma. It's also about reclaiming who you *still* are inside, despite what you went through or never received. And this part of you offers a life beyond survival, because this part of you also knows your true path.

As you continue your healing, you'll feel glimmers of this part—through small moments of compassion, balanced presence, and joy. And when you do, gently let yourself know…

This is You remembering. This is You beyond trauma.

Of course, there will be days when you forget—or when the weight of the child and her protectors are near. So on such days let these important words find you, and let this book offer a soft light to guide you.

And when you, again, feel a glimmer inside, let yourself pause… and then quietly whisper:

I see you there.
I am learning to come home to you.
I am finally reclaiming the always part of me.

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TK

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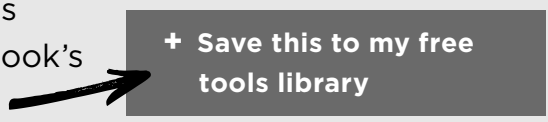

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