Reclaiming What Was Lost

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

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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 years or even decades later. This isn't terribly surprising. In fact, it makes complete and total sense. Because CSA can change everything—including how your brain and nervous system function long afterward.

However, this is only half of the story. Because, while your brain was being forced to rewire to survive imposed trauma, the abuse was also *taking* something utterly profound. You see, every child is born already deeply lovable. You are inherently worthy and naturally deserving. You matter. And coming to know—really know—this truth about yourself is a vital task of childhood. It's what builds the foundation for a healthy adulthood. But it's something CSA can seriously erode—especially if you had nowhere to else turn. Therefore, getting through this form of trauma, especially during childhood, is nothing short of monumental…and so is the work you can now offer yourself as you also reclaim what was lost.

<ah>The Double Wound of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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

In this study scientists were curious about when the brain learns certain abilities needed to navigate the world (Blakemore and Cooper 1970). Specifically, the researchers wondered if there are *critical periods* of time when the brain needs specific experiences to "wire up" specific abilities.

To explore this, the team did something bold. They lovingly raised kittens in an environment containing only vertical lines—nothing horizontal. Not on the walls, not on the

furniture, not even in the architecture of the room. The only lines the kittens experienced were tall, thin, and vertical for the entire critical learning period the researchers were studying.

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 there. They were an undeniable part of the kittens' outside world. But, because their brains didn't experience horizontal lines during the critical period that mattered, it was as if horizontal lines now didn't exist at all. The kittens' ability to perceive 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 vital truths—truths about yourself 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 Self inside, eternally wonderful and real.

Childhood and adolescence are, themselves, critical periods. Just as kittens need exposure to horizontal lines to experience them later in life, all children need consistent mirroring of their true worth to *really feel* this as they grow (Ainsworth 1979; Bowlby 1988; Neufeld and Maté 2004; Perry 2017; Schore 2012; Siegel and Payne Bryson 2011; Winnicott 1971). Without this, a child's sense of herself can become limited and distorted. Instead of feeling worthy to belong, be loved, and be safely seen and known, she grows up feeling different, bad, and unsafe—like she's living in a world made for others, not her.

<ah>You (and Your Nervous System) Did Nothing Wrong

If any of this resonates with you, here's what I'd like you to know: None of this was your fault—no matter what. You didn't do anything to make the abuse happen. And you didn't do anything to lose your inherent worthiness in any way. That is the truth. What you needed was simply not made available (or available enough) by the important people around you. 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, and even 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*. Not only can your trauma be better processed, but those inherent truths about you and your worth are as valid today as the day you were born. And they're waiting for you to recover them—even all these years later. In fact, reclaiming these essential truths about yourself is a vital part of healing, and is something so many women still long for.

<ah>Respecting the Parts That Helped You Through It

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 you inside—parts with specific brain functioning that helped you 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 protected you by keeping you quiet and hidden; alert and on guard; submitting or numb; needful and dependent; critical and controlling; frozen and shut down; or avoidant and

checked out—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—during that very vulnerable time of life. That counts for everything! These parts of you did great! The problem is, they might still be showing up in the same ways even though the abuse is over and you're now an adult.

Mislabeling Old Self-Protection Reactions

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

This book is about helping you see yourself, and these parts of you, differently: not as symptoms of a disorder to get rid of or fix—but as dutiful helpers with specific methods that got you through an overwhelming experience. And even if it's been years or decades since the abuse, these parts of you can still be acknowledged, understood, and invited to finally heal and rest. At the same time, this book will help you learn to engage other parts of yourself too—parts that have been waiting to come forward into your life with healthy presence, greater balance, safer connection, and healthy control. Parts that may not have been reflected to you or more fully developed growing up, but that hold the ability help you build a healthier life now.

<ah>A 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 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 are unhealthy for you: distrusting others in your life even though you know they're good people; avoiding things that you know you should explore more fully; repeating unhealthy patterns that negatively impact your life; or still feeling stuck even though you've worked through a lot of these issues already.

If any of these resonates, they are not signs of brokenness or defeat. As you'll learn, trauma and neglect don't affect only your logical mind and behavior choices. They can also have important physiological (body), neurological (brain), and developmental (sense of self) impacts. So, maintaining old patterns may simply mean that the trauma is still affecting you on *these* particular levels. Because of this, you might be seeking more than insights and coping strategies (although there will be some of this here for you too) to help. Maybe you're wondering if there's something more - something that also addresses and more deeply resolves lingering issues on these levels too.

<ah>From Coping to Reclaiming

CSA is 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 shown who you truly are inside 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.

<bh>The Polyvagal Theory

In the last two decades, the polyvagal theory (PVT) has helped us better

understand trauma and more effective ways to heal it (Porges 2011; Dana 2018). The PVT gives us powerful science about how trauma changes the brain and nervous system, while making sense of our survival reactions both during overwhelming experiences and even years or decades later.

<bh>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 and healthy mirroring about who she is despite trauma, her brain and nervous system must significantly alter to cope (Fisher 2017; Maté 2022; Porges 2011; Schore 2003; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). Here, her brain and nervous system activate something called *protector parts*—parts of herself inside with specific nervous system circuitry and reactions to help her - both during and after the trauma (Anderson 2021; Braun 1988; Fisher 2017; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006; Schwartz 2021). Although these parts of self are normal to all humans, they can become an issue after CSA.

Because childhood is a time of rapid brain development, strong use of protection responses during this time can begin to imprint. As the child's nervous system grows more vigilant to danger, her protector parts and their behaviors also stay highly activated (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schwartz 2021). Self-protection becomes her default response, while growth of more regulated parts of herself becomes overshadowed and stunted (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 is so helpful—they work with these 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 survive
- Child parts: that feel raw, scared, hurt, and overwhelmed, while also holding our unmet needs, wishes, and hopes
- Adult and core parts: that help us experience life with healthy and effective skills, wisdom and insight, safe love and connection, and a sense of purpose and meaning

<bh>Somatic Processes and Techniques

While many good therapies work with beliefs and behaviors after trauma, somatic (body-based) methods are also needed for healing (Fisher 2017; Maté 2022; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Levine 1997, 2010; van der Kolk 2014). While PVT explains our survival states and pathways for better regulation, somatic approaches emphasize the importance of *re-mobilizing* the trauma still stuck in the nervous system (Levine 1997, 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015). Somatic approaches work with the deeper brain and nervous system in a way other therapies often can't.

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 mobilizing (even long-held) stuck trauma.

How To Use This Book

Although important, self-insight, challenging thoughts and beliefs, coping skills, making new choices, and behavior changes alone cannot fully heal trauma (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). That's why working with

over-activating protective parts using somatic interventions, with polyvagal theory to guide us can be a powerful trio to support healing that is often long overdue. The approaches, tools, and techniques in this book are about reclaiming your mobility and a truer sense of self. And we do this in a way that feels right for you, with a timing that fits your nervous system. With that in mind, if there are any sections or exercises in this book that feel overwhelming or triggering, you are welcome return to them later, skip them entirely, or refer to the publisher's website for supportive additions to help you.

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, emotions, or a sense of self that can feel 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 around you.

This chapter will help you better understand CSA, normalize why it's still affecting you, and notice where healing may still be needed. (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 might feel more comfortable to you).

<ah>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, emotional influence, or coercion. 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, 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 are (or were) known to you, related to you, or you care(d) about each other in some way.

Sexual abuse can happen in a variety of different ways. Some survivors endure more than one kind of abuse, while others might not recognize their experience as abuse because they believe CSA must involve physical contact. Because there can be confusion about this, it's important to understand CSA and the different forms it can take.

<bh>Physical Sexual Abuse

CSA and incest can involve physical contact that can leave deep marks not only the body, but also 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 or 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, different forms of touching, 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 occurs through force, strong coercion, or through incapacitating methods (drugs, alcohol, or "date rape" drugs) where consent is not explicitly offered or legal.

<bh>Psychological Sexual Abuse and Emotional Incest

Psychological sexual abuse or incest may not involve physical touch, but it can create

deep confusion, fear, betrayal and lasting harm to a child or teenager (Briere and Elliott 1994 2003; Courtois 2010; Finkelhor 2009; Herman 1992). Here, sexually-based behavior becomes 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 themselves 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.

<bh>Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation happens when someone uses their power, control, or subtle or overt manipulation to take advantage of a child for sexual purposes, or to create some gain for themselves or others. This increases the 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 serious 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, money, shelter, or needed emotional attention.

Child trafficking. A child might be taken away 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's demanded by a higher power." These experiences leave the child, and often the adults around her, deeply confused, afraid, and unable to separate truth from calculated lies and manipulation by the abuser(s) (Herman 1992; Lalich and Tobias 1994; Salter 2012; Scott 2001).

<ah>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 sense of authority and trust (Briere 2006; Courtois 2010; Freyd 1996; Herman 1992; Schore 2003, 2012). Childhood is that critical period when we learn healthy love, care, and safety through how our important people treat us. Children look to their adults and older peers for steady protection, respect, and guidance. So, when her trust is betrayed through sexual abuse, it can turn her development sideways because this kind of betrayal shapes the growing nervous system, causing harm in many lasting ways (Herman 1992; Fisher 2017; Schore 2003; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014).

The Different Impacts of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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

Difficulty managing emotions and reactions. Navigating life can start to feel frequently overwhelming. Because CSA impacts emotional regulation development, feeling balanced, self-trust, or healthy control can become difficult. Even typical daily tasks 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 yourself. You might feel unsure about what behaviors are appropriate or what boundaries to set with others. You might also wonder if there are 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 the abuse happened while your brain was developing, these memories may have encoded as fragments instead of fully remembered narratives. This can lead to reexperiencing pieces of the abuse in ways that feel disconnected or random (Fisher 2017; Lanius 2015; Levine 2010; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). This can include: body memories or unexplained body sensations, overpowering or random emotions, second-guessing your memory or worrying you "made it all up", minimizing its impact, or blaming yourself for the abuse (Briere 2006; Courtois 2010; Engel 2006; Freyd 1996; Herman 1992; Lanius et al. 2014).

Feelings of shame and self-doubt. Even when you logically know the abuse wasn't your fault, a sense of shame can feel deeply embedded. Because CSA happens when your personality is still forming, the shame during the abuse can come to feel like an identity (Briere 2006; Courtois

2010; Fisher 2017; Herman 1992; van der Kolk 2014). This can manifest as feeling bad, dirty, or defective, or feelings of chronic emptiness, unworthiness, or even irrational self-loathing. This is referred to as *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; Herman 1992; van der Kolk 2014).

Difficulty getting beyond survival mode. CSA can force a child into a life that's about navigating and coping with abuse and its aftermath. If this embeds into the child's way of being, her adulthood can involve difficulty relaxing, limited curiosity or excitement, a lot of distrust, or discomfort spending time alone or with others. Finding even small joys in things can begin to feel unfamiliar, wrong, or impossible.

Feeling isolated and alone. The intense secrecy surrounding CSA is designed to make the child feel isolated and helpless (Carnes 1997; Freyd 1996; Herman 1992; van der Kolk 2014). As an adult, feeling powerless, deeply lonely, overly private, silent, different that others, and hyper-independent are common.

How your brain and body responded. CSA is not 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, the nervous system often activates a last resort form of self-protection: submitting, complying, freezing, or shutting down. These are not choices; they are instinctive reactions beyond the child's 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 let happen—that they consented and made choices. This confusion can deepen when the attention or sexual sensations bring moments of comfort or pleasure. Although these reactions are natural and common, they can confuse the child (well into her adulthood), and also be used to further

normalize the abuse.

Although CSA is complex, here is the truth: even if it "didn't feel that bad," even if you froze or submitted, even if there were moments where 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.

Normal Child Sex Play vs Childhood Sexual Abuse

Childhood sexual abuse is very different from developmentally normal, consensual child sex-play. The difference comes down to power, intention and impact, and the consent of age-similar peers (Courtois 2010; Finkelhor 2009; Herman 1992).

CSA always involves a power imbalance—whether through age, size, authority, emotional influence, or coercion. Here, 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, threats, manipulation, or exploitation—subtle or overt. And, one way or another, it leaves lasting harm on a child's sense of safety, trust, and developing personality (Leclerc and Wortley 2015).

In contrast, consensual sex play between children of similar ages is typically exploratory and curiosity driven. It is mutual, not coerced, and generally ends if either child begins to feel uncomfortable. It does not rely on fear-based secrecy by one party, and it reflects a natural stage of growth and development (Gil and Johnson 1993; Johnson 2010).

Again, the clearest difference between the two is the intention behind the behavior, the true consent of both children (or teens), the power dynamics present, and the impact on the child afterward (Courtois 2010; Friedrich 2007). However, if a close-in-age peers forces unwanted sexual contact, the effects can mirror those of CSA and become sexual trauma (Shaw 2000).

<ah>Childhood Sexual Abuse: 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 didn't create conditions for it to happen. You didn't permit it to continue. No child does. Although it's natural to want to feel in control of what happened, or even protect a person you thought cared about you, CSA is very complex and always the responsibility of the abuser.

Grooming

Grooming is a critical part of sexually abusing a child. It is how abusers build trust, test boundaries, manipulate, and slowly break the child down—all while keeping the abuse hidden and normalized to the child (Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist 2006). Although very subtle, grooming is very strategic, systematic, and highly 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 the many forms of manipulation it uses, are very subtle but 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 this 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 ensure their behavior stays secret. 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 acts innocent, kind, caring, or even protective, which allows a child to relax into trust. Even though the abuser's behavior is not genuine, it can absolutely feel this way to the child.

Filling your needs. Next, the abuser focuses on meeting the needs of the child, which will solidify his hold over her. This can include affection, special attention, favoritism, gifts, or some form of rescue she needs. The abuser might even step in as a caretaking figure when the child feels neglected or alone.

Isolating you. Over time, the abuser works to create distance between you and the people who could protect you—your parents, siblings, friends, or teachers. They accomplish this through physical isolation and creating a lot of alone time together. It can it also involve emotional isolation, making you feel unseen and misunderstood by all others except him.

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

Maintaining control. Once more intense sexual abuse begins, abusers work hard to keep it a secret. They use both subtle and overt types of fear, guilt, and threats to silence the child or suppress any concerns she may have. Abusers can also make the child feel responsible for the

abuse, convincing her that harsh consequences could result if the abuse is discovered. And abusers are skilled at threatening loss to the child: their "special love," someone to really care for her, her reputation, or even her safety or that of her loved ones.

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

Exercise: Naming Common Misbeliefs

Many women who endured CSA still carry beliefs from past sexual abuse. These beliefs may feel deeply ingrained despite logically knowing something different. However, simply recognizing that these beliefs are still active can be an important beginning in healing.

Below is a checklist of common beliefs many women still carry about past CSA. As you go through the list, you can check any that still feel active for you, even if you logically know they're 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 me.

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 don't want pity. I hate being seen as weak.

I should have healed by now. Others I know seem over it, so why aren't I?

People will think less or different about me 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. And it's been a long time. I should just leave it alone.

Facing it will just 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 truly 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 tell the people in my life in order to heal this.

I'll have to confront my abuser in order to heal this.

I'll have to talk about every incident in detail in order to heal.

This was the way he showed love for me. He was too nice to have meant to abuse me. That's not who he was.

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 the different ways sexual abuse relationships are groomed with a child, take a moment to reflect. Do any of those still keep your beliefs active? It's okay if they do—that's really common, even well into adulthood. Are there any beliefs that still feel especially active? How might they be holding you back in your life now—either in clear or even subtle ways?

Trauma Bonding

As we learned 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 her adults. It's a brilliant strategy that creates a false sense of caring under the guise of a unique and important relationship. It's very understandable that the abuse can feel so confusing—how can a seemingly kind and caring person be capable of such calculated abuse? This is exactly what makes grooming so powerful and effective, and why it can lead to something called *trauma bonding*.

Trauma bonding (Carnes 1997) happens when an abuser switches between harming you and showing you care. This switching creates a complicated emotional attachment in the child's mind and nervous system, causing her to feel more in control than she is (Carnes 1997; Freyd 1996; Herman 1992).

The formation of a trauma bond is *never* the fault of the child. The problem, however, is that such bonding can tie women to the abuse or abuser even years later (Carnes 1997 2005; Fisher 2017; Herman 1992 2015; van der Kolk 2014). Therefore, after years of such a mixture of feelings and experiences, seeing the abuser's true motives can feel difficult. The old grooming, and the feelings it created, can still be active into adulthood.

If any of this resonates with you, here's what's important to know: Trauma bonding is a survival mechanism; it's how your mind and body kept you feeling a sense of connection, control, and safety in a very complex and unsafe situation (Briere 2006; Carnes 1997; Herman 2006; Freyd 2008). This 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 who are sexually abused face a lot of barriers when it comes to disclosing: youth and lack of development; limited knowledge of abuse dynamics; the powerful and complex grooming process; ongoing (even very subtle) threats and manipulations; trauma bonding; the resulting fear, shame, and deep confusion; a potential lack of good supports and resources; other difficult dynamics in your life; and even attention and special feelings the abuse may have given you. CSA if far more complex than 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 changed in the last few decades, our culture still doesn't make it easy for survivors to come forward or heal. Fear of stigma, still knowing the abuser, denial of abuse, faulty beliefs, and a lack of good resources can make survivors stay quiet and go it alone.

Exercise: Considering the Truths

Earlier in the chapter, we explored some common misbeliefs many women still hold about their abuse. But with this new information—and perhaps a growing understanding—you might consider some CSA truths.

How many of the truths below might you begin to consider at this stage of your healing? Some truths may feel easier to accept, while others might be tough to reach just now. That's okay. Healing is a process, and 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 feel completely true for me now.

Take your time, and remember, this exercise is meant to help you explore where you are in your journey and what might matter to you at this point. Try to avoid any self-judgment or self-pressure. And see if you can evaluate this not just from a logical level (i.e., logically I

believe it), but from a felt-sense perspective too (this actually feels true deeper down too). You can also notice which are only logically true for you just now but don't feel true just yet.

Truths About Childhood Sexual Abuse

[[Insert short blank line]] The abuse was not my fault.

[[Insert short blank line]] I had no real power to stop the abuse. I was a kid with a lot stacked against me.

[[Insert short blank line]] I didn't deserve what happened to me.

[[Insert short blank line]] Not fighting back didn't mean I wanted the abuse.

[[Insert short blank line]] Each form of sexual abuse I experienced was real, and it impacted me in some (even small) way.

[[Insert short blank line]] I wasn't too old to be a victim of CSA.

[[Insert short blank line]] I am hurt and wounded, but not forever broken and defective.

[[Insert short blank line]] My experience was real and it still matters, even if others won't understand that.

[[Insert short blank line]] I don't need to compare my pain to anyone else's. Pain is pain, and its impact is real.

[[Insert short blank line]] My particular way of healing doesn't have to have a specific or well-planned timeline.

[[Insert short blank line]] Telling my story can be in my own time, in my own way, and with only safe, capable people in my life.

[[Insert short blank line]] It was not my job to protect myself from the abuser then.

[[Insert short blank line]] I did nothing to make the abuse continue, even if my relationship with

the abuser continued.

[[Insert short blank line]] Trusting someone who hurt me does not make me at fault.

[[Insert short blank line]] I'm allowed to be impacted by the abuse, no matter how long it's been.

[[Insert short blank line]] The abuser used a lot of tactics to keep me powerless and confused. Even if they still confuse me, that's normal and okay.

[[Insert short blank line]] Caring about my abuser (then or even now) does not erase what he did.

[[Insert short blank line]] While it's hard to admit I was helpless to the abuser, that was the truth because I was a child.

[[Insert short blank line]] I can be nervous about healing and what that might bring into my life now.

[[Insert short blank line]] I deserved better than I got from the abuser and those around me.

[[Insert short blank line]] I can be angry and hurt by what happened to me. I don't have to rescue others from that.

[[Insert short blank line]] I was abused because I was in a vulnerable situation and stage of life. That's all. It was my circumstances, not something about me, that caused him to abuse me.

[[Insert short blank line]] I can learn how to hold the tough feelings about the abuse that I still avoid.

[[Insert short blank line]] Sexual abuse to a child really is big. I'm not being too sensitive or overreacting.

[[Insert short blank line]] My abuser's "good moments" do not erase any of the abuse.

[[Insert short blank line]] Liking the abuser's attention didn't mean the abuse was okay in any way.

[[Insert short blank line]] Liking the abuser's attention doesn't mean I wanted or kept the sexual

part of the abuse going.

[[Insert short blank line]] Feeling pleasure from the abuse doesn't mean there was something wrong with me, or that it wasn't abuse.

[[Insert short blank line]] Healing doesn't make my abuse less real, or let the abuser(s) or others off the hook.

[[Insert short blank line]] 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.

[[Insert short blank line]] Not feeling deeply impacted by the abuse doesn't mean it hasn't shaped me in some way.

[[Insert short blank line]] I experienced victimization in my childhood. That's part of my story. I was victimized.

[[Insert short blank line]] There might be struggles in my life now that are because of the sexual abuse I went through.

[[Insert short blank line]] I don't have to process every sexual abuse experience to heal. And I can choose where I start, continue from, or end.

[[Insert short blank line]] I am just as deserving of the empathy I feel for other CSA survivors.

[[Insert short blank line]] I did nothing to seduce the abuser. No healthy or safe adult is seduced by a child in any way.

Where Do We Go from Here?

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 you take is part of the journey, and it's okay to take your time.

In chapter 3, we're going to dive a little deeper into what the latest science tells us about

how CSA can impact a child's growing brain and nervous system. This will help you to better understand why (and how) you might still be struggling with the effects of the abuse.

But before we do that, in chapter 2, let's take some time to focus on different options for grounding and pacing to build gentle compassion for yourself and the child you were, while growing a 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) and healthy boundaries, frequent emotional overwhelm, toxic shame, isolation, different types of fragmented memories, and living in coping or survival mode.

• Grooming is a deliberate and highly manipulative process abusers use to gain trust, break down defenses, and keep the abuse hidden. Trauma bonding makes survivors feel attached to, and even protective of, the person who abused them.

• Healing begins by considering CSA truths: The abuse was never your fault, you were too young to consent, and your coping responses and complex feelings were normal, human reactions to something that should never have happened to you.

Chapter 2

Building Your Grounding and Pacing

Experiencing trauma, especially sexual trauma in childhood, shakes our very sense of balance, consistency, and time. Too many things start to feel overwhelming—like they're moving too fast or too slow.

Mobility vs. Immobility: The Trauma Code

One of the most important things to understand about trauma—especially CSA—is that it disrupts and shuts down our inherent sense of mobility—that vital inner sense of movement, curiosity, freedom, and flow. That's because overwhelming experiences can force the body into a state of immobility (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). This happens when a threat cannot be talked down, fought off, or fled from, meaning pain or suffering will be endured. In such defenseless moments, the body's freeze–shutdown (i.e., immobilizing) response can be a vital form of self-protection. It helps the mind escape what the body cannot, while potentially minimizing harm and ending the abuse more quickly (Fisher 2017; Levine 1997, 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

When the freeze-shutdown state activates, our voice disappears, our muscles become stiff or weak, our breathing shallows or stops—and a deep stillness takes over (Levine 1997, 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). This is not the stillness of contentment or peace. It's the stillness of immobilizing for self-protection and coping. And we don't get a conscious choice about this. The deeper brain and body are wired to do this for us if an overwhelming situation will be experienced (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

It's really important to know that our freeze-shutdown response—and its state of immobility—is not weakness, failing, or any type of consent. Ever! It's an old, instinctive, and intelligent brain strategy that can give mercy or safety when fighting or fleeing are not possible (Levine 1997, 2010; Porges 2011).

All that being true, here's how this can create imbalance in the nervous system: When the protective state of freeze (i.e., immobilization) has to activate during trauma, an immense amount of our energy—and its brain and body chemistry—has to quickly and fully shut down to make us still (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). If that energy cannot be *properly* released and processed *after* the trauma, the body keeps attempting its discharge (Levine 1997, 2010). This can show up as restlessness, agitation, or the fight-or-flight attempts that were blocked during the original abuse. And, because immobilization robs a child of her sense of freedom and choice, even ordinary situations can now trigger shock, fear, or shame. In fact, over time, the nervous system can begin to default to freezing or shutting down even in moments that are actually safe and manageable (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

Healing from CSA trauma means reclaiming some internal middle ground by using two solid practices: *grounding* and *pacing*. Why do these matter? Because developing and strengthening these abilities allows you to:

- Have more balanced connections with yourself and others
- Stay present and feel capable in challenging situations
- Recognize your power in making different choices
- Trust that there is patience and understanding to let you take your time
- Healthily express your needs without guilt, fear, or shame

Rita's Story

Rita was struggling. She felt like everything in 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 often commented on Rita's loud way of walking, fast style of talking, and constant fumbling with tasks. By the end of each week, Rita would finally collapse—she'd zoned out, "not give a shit," and drink wine to self-soothe. Rita wondered if this up-and-down pattern, that was now a way of life, resulted from her childhood abuse.

<ah>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 safe to engage yourself and others, be curious, and manage the needs of your life. As your grounding skills grow, you'll navigate your thoughts and feelings without them overtaking your sense of control. While this doesn't mean everything will always feel calm, you'll be able to handle life's challenges and true joys.

What do we mean by pacing? Pacing skills help you to balance your energy so life doesn't feel too fast or too slow. Because trauma uses more extreme speeds to cope, our nervous system can now default to swinging between fight-or-flight and freeze-shutdown responses. 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; van der Kolk 2014). Therefore, pacing, like grounding, is vital to healing because it gives you a new rhythm and healthier empowerment.

<ah>Your Grounding and Pacing Exercises

Having a *regular* routine to grow grounding and pacing skills is a vital component of nervous system healing. It's exactly like strengthening a muscle in your body—the more consistently you practice, the stronger it gets. And, the cool thing is, this isn't just habit-building—being purposeful with this practice also changes your brain and body (Doidge 2015; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). And, because it's a counter-response to the changes created by trauma, this also gives you a way to reclaim a healthier sense of power.

As you take on these exercises, life will inevitably throw curveballs that get in the way of being consistent with them. 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 practice to regain your routine as soon as you can. As the saying goes, the more you put in, the more you get out. As time goes on, your grounding and pacing will strengthen and begin to feel more natural and 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 a tough situation while also developing your overall emotional and physical regulation inside. Again, your consistency with these exercises is key.

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

<bh>Breathwork

Breathwork is a helpful practice for grounding and pacing because it trains your nervous system to slow down, find greater balance, and even release trauma from your body (Brulé 2017;

Brown and Gerbarg 2012; Dana 2018; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 2017).

Although there are many types of breathwork, we'll look at three here: *box breathing* for becoming 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 what feels right just now. (Video examples of each type of breath can be found at www.nhp.com).

<ch>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 help you feel 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:

1. Find a quiet place where 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.
2. Inhale slowly through your nose for a count of four.
3. Hold your breath for a count of four.
4. Exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of four.
5. Hold again for a count of four.
6. Repeat this cycle for four to five rounds, or as long as feels comfortable to you. Take your time to create a rhythm that feels consistent and then let your breath settle into a flow. Aim for at least a 7 out of 10 on the comfort scale before moving to the next step.

7. Once you have a nice cycle of beath, you can move your awareness toward your body. Here, you are noticing what feels too fast or too slow just now. You might notice this through 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 a part of your body. If there are multiple areas, choose just one, whichever you notice first.
8. Next, as you inhale, visualize your box breath gently traveling to this area inside. As you do, say to this speed: "I see you. This breath is for you. Take your time. It's okay." Repeat this phrase with each inhale while allowing this area to experience this breath.
9. During your box breathing try not to analyze or make anything happen. Simply offer this breath to that internal speed that's too fast or too slow in this moment in time.
10. Continue until you feel better, or you're ready to close for just now.

<ch>Fire Breathing: Moving and Releasing Anxiety and Anger

Fire breath (Brulé 2017; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 2017) is a powerful tool for mobilizing anger, anxiety, and tension. It does this in a way that's slow and controlled, so its process feels well-paced and tolerable. Fire breath lets difficult energy inside have a safe outlet to release. It can also bring more presence and less stuckness to your mind and body.

Your practice:

1. Find a quiet place where 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.

2. Begin by taking a deep breath in through your nose. Allow your belly to expand to a degree that feels right. Remember to do this slowly and consciously to find a nicely paced rhythm of breath.
3. On the out breath, exhale with a slow and long "ahhhhh" sound. This exhale will come from the very back of your throat, making a slow and whispery rasping sound as it releases.
4. Take your time and repeat for at least three rounds of breath, just letting the breath find a nice flow.
5. Now, gently scan your body and notice a sensation you'd like to mobilize somewhat today. You can bring your awareness to the specific part of your body where this sensation (anxiety, anger, frustration, rage, or tension) seems to be sitting. On each inhale, pull the breath into that space, letting it surround the sensation for three to four seconds.
6. When you're ready, slowly exhale the breath, imagining some of the sensation releasing with it. Let it come out through that raspy "ahhhhhh" sound—while imagining fire, smoke, heat, and ash also releasing with it (Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 2017). Take your time and go at your own pace.
7. After three to five breaths, pause to notice any changes in your body that feel better—or even just different. You don't need to analyze this or make anything happen; remember this is just about allowing and observing.
8. You can sit with and enjoy any change that feels better, or you can continue fire breaths with what is sitting in your body now (either the original sensation or a new version of it).
9. Do as many rounds as feels comfortable, just noticing what seems to be happening inside.

10. Finish with some box breaths for grounding and closure.
11. You can journal about your experience or any insights you had.

<ch>Heart Breathing: Offering Gentle Compassion

Heart breath (Gilbert 2010; Hanson 2013; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 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, especially in childhood, the heart area can often feel sore, heavy, or guarded.

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

Your practice:

1. Find a quiet place where 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.
2. 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 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 or even skip this step today).

3. Now, take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, imagining the breath gently entering the space around your heart. If you like, you can also picture this breath as an energy (or another pleasing image) surrounding this area. Allow your inhale for a count of 3 to 5 seconds.
4. During this inhale, you can say to your heart, "This gentle breath is for you. Take as much as you like." Then, allow a slow exhale (over a period of five to 8 seconds). Repeat this process for 3 to 5 rounds.

Again, as you use this breath, you don't have to make anything happen. Gently offer it to your heart and then notice what happens. Pleasant sensations at even a 3 out of 10 are okay, and something you can notice and enjoy for a few moments.

Once you're comfortable with the heart breathing process, you can offer this breath to other aspects of your inner world. In fact, you can do heart breathing with difficult sensations, emotions, physical pain, or specific parts of yourself (more about this in part 2 of this book). Finally, when you're feeling a need to support someone you love, heart breath can be offered to their heart too—this can be done with them present or privately on your own.

<bh>Vocal Toning or Humming: For Grounding and Release

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

1. Find a quiet place where 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.
2. Start by taking a few gentle box breaths to help your body settle into this moment.
3. 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 it can be an issue you often experience that is also noticeable right now.
4. Next, sit with the issue you've chosen inside 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," "ohhh," "uuuuu," "rrrrr," or even a humming sound of a particular pitch and tone)? Because this isn't a logic-based practice, you don't have to know why—you can just intuit and allow.

BOX: When people talk about this practice, they often say things like, "I'm not sure why, but this feeling wants a long "ohhh" 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 these sounds, it's a way for our issues to be seen, heard, and expressed. And we give them a way to do this according to their nature because these issues don't release well through talking or logic.

5. If you find your attention drifting or you're getting a little too in your head, gently bring your awareness back to that issue in your body, and continue to experiment with the sound(s) it might need.
6. Once you find the sound that feels right for this issue, you can tone or hum it for three to four rounds of breaths. You can take any breaks that you need in between.
7. Next, pause and attune to the issue in this moment. If it feels better, just notice that, or you can even tone the tone of that more pleasant inner 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 resume the same sound or experiment with a new one.
8. If at any point the practice becomes intense, slow down or take a break, and do some breath work to ground. You can even shift to toning something that has a positive association and inner sensation for you.
9. When your timer sounds or you feel finished for today, end with some calming tones, or some breathwork that's grounding.

Vocal toning and humming and can bring up a range of sensations, emotions, and even images in the mind. Some people feel warmth, tingling, lightening or some kind of movement or release. Some feel emotions associated with calm, relief, or even sadness that needs processing. Others have memories arise that offer clues for deeper healing. Again, the goal here is just to connect with one issue, give it space and time, and allow it to have some movement through sound.

<bh>Body-Cocooning: For Containment

The practice of mentally cocooning your body can offer a felt sense of balanced

containment. Sexual trauma erodes this feeling early, so the body learns to feel either 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 just be a new recognition.

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

Your practice:

1. Find a quiet place where 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.
2. Take three to five gentle box breaths to help your body settle in.
3. Next, imagine the presence of a cocoon-shaped outline gently encircling your body. Your cocoon might be made of light, an energy, or a type of material that feels pleasing to you. It may have a color or a specific shape, or be thick or thin. It may have some type of movement or be very still. It might also be close to the edges of your body, or a little (or a lot) farther out. You can purposefully create your cocoon or simply notice what naturally arrives. Be patient with this process and take your time.
4. Take pauses to assess if your cocoon brings you feelings of containment, protection, relaxation, or ease.
5. If your body cocoon doesn't feel quite right, you can experiment to see what feels better. You can play with its aspects such as its distance from your body, its felt sense of speed, its thickness, or the material it's made of. Experimenting will be

part of this practice. In fact, you might want 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 just fine—it is common and normal, and an important part of the process.

6. Once your body cocoon feels right (enough) for today, begin to notice the feelings it activates in your body (e.g., softening, relief, comfort, a nicer inside pace, a little more safety, gentle empowerment, and so on). Even if their strength is a 2 or 3 out of 10, please know that this is just fine. Now, allow yourself twenty seconds or so to let your nervous system really experience these sensations. Take a short break, then reconnect, and repeat this process for three to five rounds.
7. Once your timer sounds or you feel ready to close, your cocoon can stay with you, or fade just for now. It's important to remember that having greater focus on your body while giving it boundaries may all feel quite new. Therefore, regular practice while taking your time is a key way to strengthen your body's sense of boundaries.

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

As we've learned, CSA can cause the nervous system's pacing to become biphasic - oscillating between intensity and shutdown (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2017; Rothschild 2000). Your Goldilocks zones is a practice that will help you identify and work with your internal pacing. Like Goldilocks herself, you'll be learning to notice what's "too hot," "too cold," and also "just right" (or right enough). Identifying these different states will also help you to work better with these speeds instead of

fighting them, fixing them, or trying to dismiss them.

Your practice:

1. Find a quiet place where 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.
2. Start with some breath work, vocal toning, or humming to ground yourself in this moment.
3. Now, bring your attention to the interior of your body. You can do a detailed scan or notice your body's general sections (e.g., above the waist and below the waist, left side or right side, and so on).
4. Next, locate one inner speed that you want to work with today; then identify where in your body it's located (a downloadable, colored chart outlining the different nervous system speeds and how to identify them is available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132).
5. If you've located a speed that is running too fast, it might include 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 include these sensations: cold, collapsed, dull, empty, flat, foggy, gooey, hazy, heavy "meh," numb, spacey, stuck, or "zoney."
6. Once you've chosen your speed for today and located where it seems active in your body just now, allow yourself to just be curious. Suspend judgment, analysis, or aiming for change. Observe it objectively - as it is in this moment.
7. Once you're connected, you can work with this speed by:

   • Noticing a mental image or metaphor that seems to represent it (e.g., a shape, color,

texture, or specific image). Notice the feel of the speed with the image that pairs with it. Allow it to be.

• Connecting with it, saying, "I see you. I feel your pace just now. You're welcome here. I'm learning to connect with you." You can offer three rounds of these statements, then pause to observe its felt sense or reaction to this. Just notice.

• Offering it breath work, toning, or humming. For example, say to it, "This fire breath is for you. I'll offer you three rounds and then just observe you." Or, "I'll tone the tone of you for four rounds and then pause to notice the feel of your pace." The key here is to just observe, allow, and work with this speed as it is.

8. Choosing a just-right speed: As part of healing, many women want to learn to notice the balanced speeds their nervous systems can create. Because regulation can feel limited or absent, they want to connect with a speed that's just right (or just right enough). If you're locating a pace that's more regulated inside, it 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, applying the processes above.
9. If locating a just right speed inside your body seems difficult right now, you can find something *outside* of your body that seems to have that pace you're looking for. This might be: a color, an object, a person you know, a guru you follow, a sound, a song, a gentle fabric, and so on. Here, imagine being this object, and sense the *feel* of its just right (enough) speed. Imagine you're borrowing its particular pace, and then feel where this activates inside your body. Even if it's a 2 or 3 out of 10, or if comes and

goes, continue to return and attune to this speed you're intuiting. As this strengthens, you can begin to work with it by applying some of the options above.

<bh>Tucking-In Exercise: For Pacing and Rest

As kids—and adults—tucking-in rituals prepare our nervous systems to wind down and rest. Such routines signal that it's now safe to calm and put away the issues of the day. Therefore, tucking-in is not just about getting cozy. It's also about quieting different aspects of our lives (thoughts, feelings, situations, and tasks), giving them respite so we can rest too.

For women with histories of CSA, tuck-ins in childhood may have been absent or unsafe. Moreover, when tough moments came and no space for this was offered, the body couldn't learn how to pause and just be. Instead, it defaulted to just staying on, seeing periods of rest as dangerous or indulgent. This is why tucking-in is a part of our healing—it teaches us that pausing is a core need of life.

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

Your practice:

1. Find a quiet place where 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.
2. Use breath work or vocal toning to settle into the moment.
3. Notice something inside that needs tucking in just now—whether you're preparing for rest or in the middle of your day. This might include a difficult

feeling or sensation in your body, a situation you're dealing with, a piece of healing work you're doing, or even a person in your life. Whatever it is, just recognize that, for now, it's time for this to safely tuck-in.

4. Imagine a place for this to tuck-in. This can include a (metaphoric or real) safe container, a cozy room, a space in nature, or a distant location like a different city, country or planet. Don't worry about the logic or physics of this. Just notice what feels right, and prepare to tuck this in.
5. Now say to this issue: "It's time tuck-in; it's okay now to pause. I've created a safe place for you until we meet again. Our respite doesn't mean I'm letting you go. You're important to me, and I promise I'll return. I will see you soon. Off you go for now." If you like or need, you can slowly repeat these words three or four times, like you might with a settling child. Just notice what happens without forcing an outcome. (If there's hesitation for this issue to tuck-in, know this is normal and part of relearning. You can offer it fire breath for any anxiety or resistance, or tone the tone of its worry about tucking in for just now).
6. Notice any sensation of regulation that's arrived—even if it's the size of a fingernail. Just attune to this sensation and its space in your body; enjoy this for a moment without analysis or effort.

<ah>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 awkward - that's okay. In fact, it's actually very normal and will shift with time. Like any new practice, you need patience, space, and consistence. Each practice matters—it makes a difference inside.

As well, stay curious as you learn and integrate these exercises. Some will feel natural, you may come to have favorites, while others will take longer or may be tucked-in for now. But 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—inside or in life.
- Five core practices to grow grounding and pacing in the nervous system include: breathwork (box, fire, and heart breathing), vocal toning, body-cocooning, Goldilocks speeds, and tucking-in.
- Healing through grounding and pacing practices takes patience, curiosity, and routine—progress grows over time, even with 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 the world. Many women find their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have changed in ways that remain tough to understand. It can also be frustrating when you've tried different strategies to heal, but old triggers and reactions continue. You start to wonder if what happened to you in childhood now needs something more.

In 2011, a different way to understand trauma arrived. Psychologist and researcher Dr. Stephen Porges introduced the evidence-based and highly regarded polyvagal theory (PVT) of trauma. The PVT was important because it showed why post-traumatic issues can endure—even after therapy. It also offered new insight into what CSA trauma needs to help you process it better.

The PVT is different because it looks beyond trauma's impact on just the mind. It also shows how trauma can change the deeper nervous system—primitive parts of the brain and body that don't respond to logic, reason, or conscious choice (Fisher 2017; Lanius, Paulsen, and Corrigan 2014; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). The PVT shows how our old and *unprocessed* threat-response patterns can stay locked in the brain even long after trauma is over. This explains why women can overreact to ordinary life situations even decades after the abuse is over. As it turns out, healing trauma requires more than changing problematic thoughts and behaviors—the PVT shows why good trauma treatment must also reach these deeper nervous system injuries (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; 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 who reminded her of her abusive uncle. These triggers would send Sofia into periods of spiral where self-doubt, insecurity, and toxic shame took over. She struggled to sleep or focus on her work, her mind buzzing with endless replays about her 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 nervous system were still activating protection cycles that weren’t properly processed back in the past. Even though Sofia logically knew she was safe now - and even had healthier ways to cope - her deep brain and body remained on alert awaiting the next attack.

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

Your Nervous System During Trauma

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

- *Parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS):* This branch of your ANS helps you feel calm and connected to your life. It’s like a natural regulator or peacekeeper for your body, helping you stay balanced and engaged physically and emotionally. When a particular part of your PSNS is activated, you feel a healthy sense of control, safe connection with yourself and others, and an ability to functioning well in the different

parts of your life (Dana 2018; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020).

Sympathetic nervous system (SNS): The other branch of your ANS is your SNS—the vital part of your system that gets you ready for action. Your SNS activates the brain and body chemistry needed for intense focus, motivation, and mental and physical effort. This important system keeps you alert and energized when the different aspects of your life require it (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; Dana 2018; van der Kolk 2014).

Your First-Line Defenses

Your body also relies on these two branches of your ANS when you encounter a threat or danger. In fact, there are three main ways these two branches do this: *social engagement*, *fight-or-flight*, and *freeze-shutdown*.

Social engagement (PSNS* aka *window of tolerance state). When your nervous system detects a threat or danger, its first line of defense is something called *social engagement*. Here, your PSNS will motivate you to *engage* and *seek out support* from others like friends, family, or a helpful authority. It could even prompt you to call out to strangers if the threat is more immediate or close by (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Porges 2011; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006). If help from others isn't an option, social engagement will help you connect with the threat. You'll become focused, make eye contact, use a steady voice and compelling words to negotiate your return to safety (Dana 2018; Porges 2011). And if dysregulation continues once the threatening event is over, social engagement will connect you to safe others for processing.

Fight-or-Flight (SNS a*ka *hyper-arousal state). If social engagement doesn't return you to safety, your SNS will automatically (without your conscious choice or control) activate your fight-or-flight defense. Your nervous system believes that defending yourself or escape is now what's needed to help you. Your SNS is amazing because it rapidly changes your brain and body chemistry to do things you normally couldn't. Your blood flow increases, your focus intensifies, and your muscles become very strong and powerful. The energy you need to fight hard or run fast is suddenly available for you (Fisher 2017; Dana 2018; Levine 1997; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

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* a defense cycle. And as it turns out, this matters—a lot! Here's what the PVT shows: Successfully finishing the defense your nervous system started helps it to return to normal balance afterward (Levine 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). Your nervous system resumes its regular functioning again, which reduces your chances of developing post-traumatic problems (Dana 2018; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). Moreover, if you couldn't complete these defensive responses, *but* effective social engagement was offered soon afterward (through a safe parent, teacher, a skilled therapist and so on) this can also reduce post-trauma issues (Dana 2018; Maté 2022; Porges 2017; Siegel 2012; van der Kolk 2014). Therefore, these two built-in defenses can return us to safety, while helping us not suffer post-trauma afterward!

Journal Exercise:

As you read, you might remember times in your life when your nervous system rose to a big challenge or threat—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 recall past experiences to help you integrate what you're learning here. You can choose at least two to 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) issue.
- Describe a situation in your life when a fight-or-flight response helped you neutralize a threat of some kind.
- Describe a situation when your social engagement or 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 and move on soon afterward)?

The Last Resort Defense

What if social engagement or fight-or-flight are not enough 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, this is when our third defensive response will automatically activate.

Freeze-shutdown (PSNS aka hypo-arousal state). When a return to safety is not going to be possible, another part of our PSNS now automatically activates. It triggers our last resort protection response, an ancient defense we call freeze-shutdown (Dana 2018; Levine 1997 2010; Porges 2011; Ogden and Fisher 2015; van der Kolk 2014).

Freeze-shutdown is like an emergency brake in the brain and body - and it's really important when we've run out of options. That's because when you can't negotiate with, seek support for, fight off, or escape a threat, you'll have to endure a form of suffering or harm. Here, your nervous system wants to ensure four things (Dana 2018; Levine 1997 2010; Maté 2022; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014):

- you stay still and quiet to notice any potential escape option
- you stay still and quiet to avoid provoking further aggression
- you don't resist so the harm is over as quickly as possible
- you have a way to mentally escape the suffering you can't escape physically.

To accomplish this, our freeze-shutdown defense creates brain and body chemistry to make us *immobilize*: become physically numb, mentally dissociated, temporarily paralyzed, or even unconscious - until the abuse is over. As trauma expert Peter Levine (1997, 2010) clearly asserts, this type of immobility is not weakness, failure, or consent—of any kind! It is a primitive but necessary automatic defense that helps us minimize risk and get through overwhelming trauma.

Insert Chart #1: Insert Chart #2

The Trauma Code—Mobilizing Versus Immobilizing

When something frightening happens and our mobilizing defenses (social engagement and fight-or-flight) successfully eliminate a threat and return us to safety, our nervous system can return to its normal balance and regulation – lowering our chances of developing post-traumatic issues afterward (Porges 2011; Levine 2010; van der Kolk 2014). But when these defenses will not be enough, and we're about to endure a trauma we can't escape, the nervous system activates our last-resort defense: the primitive response of freeze-shutdown. This automatic reaction is all

about immobility, because this stillness can reduce further harm, while helping us endure inevitable trauma (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden et al. 2006; Porges 2011).

In life we will face inescapable threat, so our freeze-shutdown defense is really important. But because immobilizing doesn't let us complete a defense cycle, it can stay stuck in the nervous system even long after the trauma (Levine 1997, 2010; van der Kolk 2014).

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 held tightly by her safe, loving partner). This type of immobility is paired with social engagement – it is not about freezing or shutting down. Therefore, not only does this feel good and build connection, it can actually grow and enhance healthy nervous system functioning (Porges 2011). It's why immobility paired with calm is so important during that critical period of childhood.

The problem occurs when immobility is *paired with fear or high stress* – not only does this activate the freeze-shutdown response, but it requires a lockdown of brain-body energy, something that can become very toxic to a nervous system – especially during that critical period of childhood development (Ogden and Fisher 2015; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020; Schore 2002; van der Kolk 2014). Without *proper re-mobilizing* and *release* afterward, you become like a boiling pot with the lid shut tight. The pressure remains. The churning continues. It leaks out and spurts until the pressure breaks through. Then the lid is replaced, it continues to boil, and the process repeats again and again.

If only this energy could just fade over time, or drain out through talking, new insights, or conscious behavior change. But it doesn't. For true healing to finally take hold, *we must return to that still-unfinished defense cycle and help it to finally complete* (Levine 1997, 2010; Maté 2003;

Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; Swart 2019; van der Kolk 2014). When we finally re-mobilize and then discharge that old, shut-down energy, two things begin to happen: We reduce long-held post-traumatic reactions, while also gaining access to our healthier resources inside.

Re-Mobilizing and Completing the 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 but mobilizing practices – interventions you can try on your own, or with a skilled clinician trained in these methods. The good news is that real healing is still possible. With the right tools and support, your system can begin to loosen, find gentle movement, and finally feel some freedom it's been long awaiting.

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 too. 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. It helped her to see why she was still triggered by thoughts of her uncle. In fact, Sofia began noticing her other defensive overreactions in situations that were actually safe and manageable. Sofia now saw that despite her challenging old beliefs, new ways of behaving, and better coping skills, these just weren't enough to release what she still needed *re-mobilize* inside. Sofia understood that her nervous system needed to discharge that old protective energy – the chemistry that had to freeze and shutdown during the CSA.

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 first asked to call her parents, but her uncle said that they wouldn't be available. Sofia then attempted jokes and fun board games to change his behavior "back to normal".

When this didn't work, Sofia fled to her room to hide under the covers to try to escape. When her uncle came in and continued to assault her, Sofia's body 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. It was here that her nervous system activated its last-resort defense—Sofia began to freeze and shut down. Sofia's body became stiff and still, hoping an option to escape would present. But when it didn't, her mind became hazy and far away. Sofia's nervous system knew trauma was inevitable. Now its job was to minimize harm, quicken the event, and help Sofia get through it.

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

Second Journal Prompt

If it feels comfortable, reflect on a time when you had a strong emotional or physical reaction to something that was actually benign—a sound, smell, a person, a video, or a comment. Could this be your body trying to complete an old protection response and release old energy from trauma? Could these reactions be your nervous system thinking you're still at risk?

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 still react to

past trauma where mobilizing energy locked down. For example, you might notice bouncing your leg when talking to an irritating person, clenching your fists when with a person who reminds you of the abuser, biting your lips when you feel too seen or exposed, sleeping in a particular position that allows 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. Despite what you might know logically, these can be clues about incomplete actions from the past. In fact, through these reactions, different *parts* of you inside are actually showing themselves to you. In the next chapter, we're going to learn more about these self-parts, and how they appear when old trauma re-activates.

Key Points

- The PVT explains how trauma impacts the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which has two key branches to support us – in both everyday life and during overwhelming situations: the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). When facing threat, the ANS activates 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 – with limited chance of long-term post-traumatic issues. When escape is impossible, the nervous system activates freeze-shutdown, an automatic last-resort survival response from the deep brain and nervous system.
- Unfinished defense cycles (incomplete social engagement or fight-or-flight) leave emotional and physical energy stuck in the nervous system, fueling ongoing trauma symptoms.

- Immobility paired with safety (like being swaddled or lovingly embraced) can strengthen regulation, but immobility paired with fear can become toxic to a developing nervous system.
- Healing requires re-mobilizing and completing old defense cycles, rather than relying on time, logic, 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, then worry she'd be "dropped like a bad habit" by everyone. Even when she learned to set boundaries or say no, Tracy still felt compelled to sense what others wanted from her. And while trying to fall asleep every night, Tracy analyzed the things she'd said or done throughout the day. She felt she was just 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 just can't seem to stop. Yes, they've learned some very useful tools that, for a time, do help. Or they've used their own brand of coping through keeping busy, taking on others' problems, using substances to calm down, or over-seeking support from others. But despite this, old impulses eventually 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 finally make them end?

One of the most illuminating things I've learned in my career is a user-friendly model that helps this make sense. This model shows us why our old reactions continue despite gaining insight and resources, or the passage of time.

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

<ah>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 (2004, 2006) and has been enhanced by Dr. Janina Fisher and her colleagues over the years (Fisher 2017; Ogden and Fisher 2017; Ogden, Minton and Pain 2006). This important model gives us invaluable insight into trauma's lingering effect on the 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 and nervous system 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 delighted in for who we truly are. In other words, we can generally experience ourselves, others, and the world in a benevolent, balanced, and healthy way. As a result, we develop solid emotional regulation, comfort being seen, a curiosity to explore, and an ability to share and receive. We can engage in self-reflection, critical thinking, and good judgment. We can meet our goals and navigate different challenges fairly well. And we can experience self-love and appreciation, empathy, and good connection with safe others. Finally, we don't just

experience these abilities once in a while; they're how we respond to much of life (Fisher 2017; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006; Schore 2003; Siegel 2020).

When we have these abilities it shows the healthy development of a nervous system state called the *window of tolerance*, a state that matures over the first twenty-five years of life *(Fisher 2011 2017; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Siegel 2020)*. Our window of tolerance is the inner state from which we should be responding to much of our life because it gives us access to healthy and balanced social engagement abilities (Fisher 2017; Schore 2003; Siegel 2013).

The SDM also explains what can happen when these important experiences aren't offered to a growing child—or if trauma, abuse, or neglect are also happening in the child's life. Here, important parts of the brain and nervous system do not develop as they should, and alternative (and problematic) ways of coping with life can begin to take root: worry, anxiety, anger, perfectionism, hyper-independence (hyper-arousal), or escapism, addiction, high need, avoidance, and dissociating (hypo-arousal) (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014). In other words, something called *structural dissociation*—parts of the nervous system splitting off and becoming preoccupied with threat, self-protection, and survival—begins to develop.

<ah>The Brilliance of the Nervous System

Structural dissociation is just a fancy way of saying that, when we go through trauma or neglect, our growing nervous system doesn't easily forget it. In other words, in response to unhealed trauma, aspects of the deep brain and nervous system section off—they "go rogue"—and become highly oriented to different forms of threat, protection, and our unhealed wounds that fuel this (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Siegel 2020; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006). In fact, this focus on threat can become a way of life—while

having any sense of security and contentment begins to feel out of reach.

When you think about it, it's actually brilliant, even deeply admirable. Our nervous system keeps a detailed record of all our unhealed hurts, activating protective responses whenever something—even very subtly—resembles our old trauma. Over time, this becomes so automatic that there's no pause to wonder if this level of protection is actually needed. Our unhealed trauma has made the world feel generally threatening, causing a focus on self-protection to become our new normal. 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 largely selfish and untrustworthy to us

Tracy's Story, Continued

At the beginning of the chapter, you met Tracy. Recall that Tracy was struggling with perfectionism, frequent hypervigilance regarding 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 often in charge of managing her own life and that of her younger brother's. Tracy made their meals, managed 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, understood, and special. He offered money and gifts to her and her brother and helped Tracy with chores assigned by her mother. Within three months, Michael began sexually abusing Tracy, something that happened often over the next three years.

Because her father was preoccupied with drinking and her mother was just trying to keep 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 deeply confused because of Michael's ability to make her feel special, as well as his subtle but potent commands that she stay quiet about their "private time together."

After describing this picture of her childhood, Tracy became quiet for a moment, and then had a wise insight: "It's like parts of me are still waiting for the next loss, or the next betrayal, or the next rejection, 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.

<ah>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 through life (Fisher 2017; Lanius, Paulsen, and Corrigan 2014; Porges 2011; Schwartz and Sweezy 2019).

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 needing us to have

different roles, responses, and specialized functions. Just like a successful business needs different departments with various personalities and skill sets, or a healthy family needs different hierarchies and roles to manage important tasks, our inner worlds also need specialized parts to manage the different aspects of life.

<box>

As you can see, talking about our inner parts isn't just a metaphor or some idiomatic turn of phrase. Many therapy approaches, including the SDM, promote the importance of learning to recognize these normal self-parts so we can better understand ourselves and our reactions to life—particularly during and after trauma. Learning how to work with these inner parts helps them to more fully heal after trauma. It also helps them continue to develop if their growth was neglected or stunted during childhood.

<ah>Our Three States and Their Parts

In chapter 3 we explored the polyvagal theory of trauma and how the 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 when facing a real (or perceived) threat.

Now, here's where the SDM and PVT come together. Within each of these three autonomic 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 also learn how to talk to and work with. I know this sounds like a lot, but bear with me. A diagram later in the chapter will put this all together for you.

<bh>The Social Engagement State (Window of Tolerance): The Engager Parts

When our nervous system is in the social engagement state, we have access to a category of parts I call the *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. It helps us relate well to ourselves and others, while handling challenging situations in a balanced and appropriate way.
- *The core self*: a very authentic part of self that offers wisdom, deep instinct, a rich and complex maturity, and a drive for meaning and purpose in life.

<bh>Fight-or-Flight and Freeze-Shutdown (Hyper- and Hypo-arousal):The Protector Parts

When our nervous system moves into either a fight-or-flight (hyper-arousal) or freeze-shutdown (hypo-arousal) state, a category of self-parts known as *protector parts* activate (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 2017). Protector parts help us defend against threat, escape danger, or access hard-to-reach resources we need to live, grow, and thrive (Anderson 2021; Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2001 2021; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 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* helps us become numb, dissociate, or stay still and noncombative to endure what we're facing.
- *Submit* helps us please, caretake, or rescue others to gain belonging, resources, or to keep things peaceful and avoid chaos.

- *Please-see-me* ensures we get noticed and care-taken when feeling highly vulnerable, incapable, or alone.

<bh>Freeze-Shutdown (Hypo-Arousal): The Child Parts

The hypo-aroused state houses another category of self-parts called *child parts* (Nijenhuis, van der Hart, and Steele 2006; Fisher 2017; Anderson 2021; Schwarz et al. 2017). Here, there are two types: the *wounded child* (Bradshaw 1990), and the one I call the *waiting child*:

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

Below is a chart integrating the above information (a color version of this chart also is available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132). Looking at this chart regularly will help solidify these principles, giving you a nice framework for some upcoming healing work.

CHART 3

A New Normal After Trauma

After we've gone through a frightening or overwhelming experience(s), our over-reacting self-protection is not a sign that we're broken. In fact, as renowned trauma expert Gabor Maté (2022) says, these are very normal reactions to very abnormal experiences. I couldn't agree more. The human nervous system is not designed to go through repeating or deeply overwhelming experiences—particularly during the critical period of childhood (Siegel 2012;

Teicher and Samson 2016; Schore 2001; Lanius, Paulsen and Corrigan 2014; Maté 2022). Despite this, there are people in this world who perpetrate their pain and aberrant impulses on the most vulnerable among us, including children. When this happens, the child's nervous system will have no other option but to respond using heavy self-protection and survival-based strategies. And these will continue to activate if she couldn't successfully mobilize during the trauma, or if there was limited support for proper healing afterward.

Tracy's Story: Symptoms Versus 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 hypervigilance and fixation on weight was a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder, while characterizing her perfectionism as a symptom of a "low self-esteem problem." Tracy even considered her periodic bouts of anger as a symptom of premenstrual dysphoric disorder. Although it's important to be properly assessed by skilled and qualified professional, Tracy was invited to also consider these experiences from another angle.

Upon re-examination, Tracy explained that her anxiety began in childhood when she had first started school. Because Tracy had endured trauma and neglect in early childhood, she described herself as desperate to belong, and wanting to please the popular girls in her class. Tracy strived to be liked by all her teachers and avoided anything that could hurt her "stellar student" reputation. Working diligently on every assignment, Tracy pushed for straight A's while always "flying under the radar" to "avoid drama" with all people in her life.

Tracy also talked about her life-long struggle to trust any man as a teen and adult. She found emotional and physical intimacy challenging, even with her husband who was a "lovely and patient guy". Tracy also discussed random episodes of intense anger that would result in her

“raging over the smallest things.” Yet even when her people were forgiving of Tracy, intense guilt pushed her to “regain their respect” 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 undervalued, forgotten, or neglected the way she was by her parents.
- Perfectionism helped keep Tracy on her toes, ensuring she’d never be average and indispensable. With this, Tracy felt protected from rejection and abandonment, another common experience of her childhood.
- Perfectionism and the results it gave Tracy helped her feel there was something special about her. Because feeling unremarkable to her parents was a daily experience, perfectionism gave her a way to feel noticed and unique.
- As a child, when Tracy did feel special, it was often by her abuser, Michael. Tracy now wondered if her striving for perfection put control of feeling special back in her own hands.
- Intense anger episodes may have been important to Tracy’s mental and physical well-being. These allowed a vital discharge of suppressed emotions and neurochemistry that had to lock down during Tracy’s childhood. Without these releases, Tracy would feel a build-up of stress that impacted her functioning. She also admitted this anger felt powerful with its message that Tracey was “not to be messed with.”

Tracy knew that what drove these reactions still required healing, and that they weren’t a free pass to behave in whatever way she needed. But Tracy was considering that these reactions

may not be from deep pathology or a resistance to change. Instead, maybe they showed that Tracy's nervous system still saw the world as dismissive, selfish, and unsafe. She was also becoming curious about a life where her protector parts didn't have to work so hard now.

Learning the Language of Trauma

As we've learned, during trauma, deep and primitive parts of the brain and nervous system take over. It's not a conscious choice we make—it's nature protecting us in whatever ways possible. We've also learned that these survival mechanisms don't understand logic, words, plans, or an updated sense of time. Therefore, despite good intentions, tools, and strategies, over-protection instincts can stay lost in the past.

Therefore, although very helpful, healing trauma also needs more than just talking, storytelling, insights, or behavior strategies. It also requires us to learn a new language—the unique language of the lower right brain and embodied nervous system (Lanius, Paulsen, and Corrigan 2014; Levine 2010; Fisher 2017; Ogden, Minton and Pain 2006; van der Kolk 2014).

Before we explore this unique and vital language, let's first spend some time getting to know your inner parts a little better—letting them know we're getting ready to listen.

Exercise: Meeting Your Parts

Before we begin deeper parts work inside, let's become more familiar with each. And we'll do this in a well-paced way, so you and your parts don't feel rushed or overwhelmed. We're just becoming familiar with their particular style and the different roles they might be playing in your life.

Let's begin by noticing who's present inside—a process we can dub "role call." By

giving different parts some paced attention and curiosity, we'll build a foundation of connection and trust. This will also help as we move forward with the healing work to come.

Your Practice

1. 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.
2. Referring to (chart #3 above), or its color version at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132, review your three autonomic states and their five categories of parts.
3. Choose one of these categories, whichever you wish—you can do this with thought or notice which one you're drawn to.
4. Using whatever medium you like (e.g., drawings, photos, pictures from the internet, crafts, or specific objects) find or create a symbol to represent one specific part 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). Here, you're just exploring what it's like to work with your parts more concretely and tangibly. Your part can be elaborate, simple, or abstract. Whichever feels best to represent it just now.
5. Once you've completed your chosen part's object, reflect on this exercise in your journal. The following prompts will guide you - you can 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? What methods of help does it seem 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 more connected with this part through the exercise above? How did your logic make sense of this part? How did your deeper nervous system feel about this part?

Key Points

- In safe and supportive childhoods, over the first twenty-five years of life, the nervous system develops capacities for emotional and physical regulation, curiosity, empathy, and connection - a strong window of tolerance with social engagement abilities. Trauma, neglect, or abuse can disrupt this, creating alternative coping strategies and structural dissociation – a heavy presence of child and protector parts even in moments of safety.
- The nervous system's protective mechanisms are creative, intelligent, and can quickly activate whenever threat (real or imaged) is suspected.
- Everyone has parts of self that manage different needs and roles in life. These are normal and with us throughout life. These parts align with three autonomic nervous system (ANS) states:

• Social engagement—PSNS—window of tolerance: Engager parts include the adult self (responsible, task-oriented, and balanced) and the core self (authentic, wise, and purpose-seeking).

• Fight-or-flight—SNS—hyper-arousal: Protector parts activate in fight, flight, freeze, submit, or please-see-me responses to real or perceived threat.

• Freeze/shutdown—PSNS—hypo-arousal: Child parts include the wounded child (holding raw, unhealed pain) and the waiting child (longing for incomplete needs to finally be met).

Part 2

Your Parts, Their Roles, and Beginning to Connect

Chapter 5:

Your Protector Parts: Fight, Flight, Freeze-Shutdown, Submit, and Please-See-Me

As you learned in chapter 3, if we're given love and proper support to remobilize after trauma—to release frozen energy and complete the cycle of defense—our chances of lasting post-traumatic symptoms are significantly reduced (Levine 2010; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014). But if we don't properly discharge and process this after the trauma, our nervous system can carry that unfinished self-protecting energy forward. Over time, this can reshape how our brain and body functions, and alter how we respond to even ordinary life - especially if trauma happens during that critical period of childhood (Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Perry and Szalavitz 2007; Schore 2001; Siegel 2020; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

One significant impact unhealed trauma can have on the developing nervous system is a change in something called our *neuroception*. Neuroception is our brain and body's built-in sensor that decides if something is safe or dangerous (Dana 2018; Porges 2011). When it's working well, our neuroception can accurately tag things as either safe or threatening, indicating how we should respond. It's an internal function that plays a big role in how we move through our world day-to-day. But after unprocessed trauma, our neuroception can become impaired—it's now either too sensitive, seeing danger everywhere, or not sensitive enough, leaving us numb to true threat (Porges 2011, 2017; Dana 2018). It can be like Goldilocks's porridge—too hot or too cold but rarely just right.

Chart 2. Or Chart 3

Too Hot: Imani's Story

Imani grew up in a community where every corner was light and familiar—fun-loving kids, lots of animals, and many kind and friendly neighbors. But when Imani turned nine, this neighborhood developed into a landscape of hidden terrors. Two older teen boys began abusing Imani under a shroud of secrecy and threat. Not only did this wound Imani's body and mind, but it reshaped how her neuroception read the world. Instead of kindness and safety, her neuroception now expected cruelty and control from the people around her. Everyday things were tagged as dangerous and overpowering; vigilance and distrust were now Imani's primary response. 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 the trauma continued to show. Imani's neuroception would now signal her to be ready for the next intimidation and betrayal. A stranger's lingering gaze would trigger high alert while her body remained tense and braced even when trying to relax.

More subtly, Imani's impaired neuroception saw danger in many of her long-term relationships. A slight change in tone or delayed response to a text was flagged as impending rejection and hurt. Even when she knew these fears were illogical, Imani's body awaited more abandonment and loss. Imani's life was still running on fear of abuse and neglect despite using good tools to help her cope.

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—it helped her survive an inescapable reality. Moreover, Pam's neuroception noticed David's increased aggression whenever Pam tried to fight or escape. Therefore, Pam's freeze-shutdown response helped to temper more vicious assaults from happening.

Pam's home life offered 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, high, or feeling pain through self-harming, Pam no longer felt much inside. As her numbness took hold, Pam's ability to sense danger also now faded and dulled. Over time, she was known as being too trusting, missing red flags that lead to "problematic choices in life.

In reality, Pam's nervous system had had early training to dismiss danger signals or to endure them through stillness and numbing. This left Pam vulnerable to toxic relationships or staying in jobs with abusive bosses and coworkers. Even in friendships, Pam often connected with those who exploited her generous 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 inside to activate—fight, flight, freeze-shutdown, submit, or please-see-me (Anderson, Sweezy,

and Schwartz 2017; Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021). This relationship between neuroception and our protector parts is natural and necessary – it plays a key role in how we respond in our lives.

Healthy neuroception is also important because it lets us know when it's safe to approach something good – a nice experience, a positive person or relationship, or an opportunity that fits for us. Without signals of true safety, we end up responding to life with distrust and too much self-protection. We limit our ability to engage life's joys.

<box>

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. When dangerous levels of gas are detected, it sounds an alarm prompting life-saving action. Similarly, when neuroception accurately assesses safety in our lives, we feel trust to engage what life has to offer. But, when neuroception flags a potential threat, it triggers the brain and body to withdrawal or defend. Whether the threat is legitimate, or just something that feels dangerous, it will prompt us to respond with quick self-protection – activating one or more protector parts.

<\box>

<ah>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. These protectors, along with their brain and body chemistry, have a vital job throughout our lives—to keep us safe, to help us cope, and to get us what we need in order to survive. And they do this with intense fierceness and loyalty, using specific tools and methods unique to each of them. So, whenever our neuroception flags something as threatening, one or more protector parts

immediately kick in - often before we can even think about it. Let's take a closer look at how each of these five specifically help us.

<bh>Fight Protector

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

Our fight part can use these tools and methods: Physical or verbal aggression; anxiety; panic; intense or frequent frustration; anger; opposition; argumentativeness; frequent complaints; high defensiveness; sanctimony; arrogance; distrust of others; high self-reliance; avoidance of appearing vulnerable; hypervigilance; guardedness. Racing thoughts; compulsive planning; perfectionism; overworking; taking over for others; heavy determination or pushing through; obsessiveness, compulsiveness, or difficulty letting things go. A strong need to understand or make sense of things; intense passions; urgency to solve problems; a constant sense of speed or pressure. High control of oneself or another; suicidal thoughts or actions (Fisher 2017; Fisher 2022; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

<bh>Flight Protector

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

Our flight part can use these tools and methods: Physically withdrawing or escaping from people, places, or situations; running away; chronic avoidance of difficult feelings; quickly cutting off relationships; procrastination; blocking commitments; abdicating responsibilities. Rationalizing things away; dismissiveness; denial; apathy. Excessive daydreaming; overuse of screens or technology; binge-watching 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 sexual behavior; gambling (Fisher 2017; Fisher 2022; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

<bh>Freeze-Shutdown Protector

Our freeze-shutdown protector part is so important in our lives—it helps us survive and endure what we can't escape physically. It also helps to keep us immobilized so harm can be minimized.

Our freeze-shutdown part can use these 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 as if you're watching yourself), derealization (feeling like the world is unreal, dreamlike, or distant), leaving the body (Fisher 2017; Fisher 2022; Schwartz 2021; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

<bh>Submit Protector

Submit helps us please and appease if confrontation or resistance might lead to threat or important loss. Our submit response comes from our instinct to avoid problems by seeking approval or by rescuing others. It can activate when we need emotional or physical safety, belonging and acceptance, or important resources that seem hard to otherwise access.

Our submit part can use these tools and methods: people-pleasing; keeping the peace; 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 boundaries; not saying no; always saying yes; 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; Fisher 2022; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006).

Please-See-Me Protector

The please-see-me protector part has the job of getting us connection and care, particularly during moments of distress, high vulnerability, or feeling helpless or powerless. Its main function is to compel others to notice us and come to our rescue or offer reassurance. 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 feeling neglected, invisible, overwhelmed, or incapable.

Our please-see-me part can use these tools and methods: Activation of "needy" feelings; frequent crying or intense emotional expression; frequent connection-seeking; regularly (over)sharing problems with others; attention seeking in various forms; feeling powerless or helpless; feeling easily forgotten, misunderstood, or victimized; feeling discomfort when alone. Sensitivity to rejection 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 2022; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Ogden, Minton and Pain 2006).

Faulty Neuroception and Our Protector Parts

As we've seen, when CSA ends and safer circumstances arrive, our nervous system doesn't always recognize the threat is gone. In other words, the child's neuroception can grow to

calibrate for danger, now always on alert with our protector parts standing by (Fisher 2017; Porges 2011; Schore 2003; Schwartz 2021). If this miscalibration stays unhealed, it can last well into adulthood, creating different over- or underreactions to everyday life (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Porges 2011; van der Kolk 2014).

When biphasic arousal (reactions to life that are too hot or too cold) becomes our norm, it can feel as if we've lost control of our lives. Our neuroception's faulty assessment of what's threatening and safe can create ongoing feelings of confusion and self-distrust. It can begin to feel like life's a constant effort—and that it's passing us by instead of us truly living it.

The natural consequences of living in over-protection mode can include strained relationships, distrust and anxiety, chronic stress, and emotional burnout - life comes to feel exhausting and meaningless. And while our protector parts are activating from good intention, we can no longer access our true self inside – or a life with more balance, meaning, and ease.

Exercise: Discovering Your Protector Parts

In this exercise, you're invited to explore which protector parts your nervous system seems to default to whenever it perceives a threat in your life. People often find that their nervous system leans toward one or two protector parts particularly, almost like a protection personality style. By recognizing which protector parts your system prefers, you can begin to recognize patterns in your post-trauma reactions. This awareness will help you to see where you may still over and under-react.

Your Practice:

1. Start by doing two grounding or pacing exercises from chapter 2.
2. Review the descriptions of each protector part earlier in this chapter and 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? Below are some prompts to guide your reflection. Choose at least two to explore in your journal.

- Which protector part(s) do I notice in my life? Which ones have others noticed in me? 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? Describe how it felt, what actions you took, and even how your body responded.
- Did this level of protection seem truly necessary for the situation? Was there a real threat or danger that required this higher-level protection? Might a more regulated part of you handled it differently? How so?
- How do my protector parts influence my relationships? Think about how your protector part shows up in your interactions with others. Does it 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) the most? Are there certain environments, people, circumstances, or stressors that activate your protector part(s) more quickly than you 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 use more regulated parts of yourself to respond? How so?

As you consider these questions, without judgement or self-criticism, notice any patterns or insights that arise. As you start to recognize your particular protection style, you'll find it easier to see and understand these automatic responses in your life.

Take your time with this exercise. There can be a lot of new information here, both from the book, and likely from within you too. You really are doing great. When you're ready, let's keep going.

Imagining Life Without So Much Self-Protection

Unless we're still living in emotional or physical danger, our protector parts are not meant to lead our daily lives. As the polyvagal theory reminds us, we are also wired for connection—connection that's safe and fulfilling and rooted in love. It is actually deeply human to seek out safe others to create meaningful moments that matter. It's also just as healthy to know our true selves with a sense of presence, compassion, and healthy entitlement. Nature has designed us not just for survival, but for belonging, security, and a sense of meaning and purpose. Therefore, secure connection—and its gift of social engagement—is not just some luxury. It's what makes life worth living.

As healing shows women the intensity of their self-protection, a gentle curiosity often starts to awaken: *What lies beyond this? How can I begin to feel safer?* And perhaps most of all—*What might feeling safer actually look like?*

Gemma's Story

After an adolescence of sexual assaults by her mother's boyfriend, Gemma lived 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 run by a fear of more hurt, so her loyal protector parts were on high-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 world.

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. Gemma would feel the world as less harsh and fickle, with no invisible audience critiquing her every move.

With a growing sense of safety, Gemma might also feel more spontaneous. She could accurately assess the true motives of the people, while setting healthy boundaries without aggression, guilt, or fear. And Gemma could finally have a relationship with herself, making space to explore what mattered most to her. "It would be 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 protector parts that carried her for so long and helped her survive, she liked the idea that *other* parts were inside, available and capable, and waiting to step forward. Unlike the protectors, these parts were not built to just guard and react or cope and endure. They were designed to reach out, to connect, and give Gemma true moments of security, connection, and ease. These were her engager parts, which could help Gemma live a life that was finally her own.

Key Points

- Our nervous system has five protector parts with their own brain and body circuitry: fight, flight, freeze-shutdown, 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 faulty—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 life. Access to our engager parts—the parts of self that are designed for relationships, purpose, and joy – becomes limited.

Chapter 6

Your Engager Parts: Adult and Core Self

In the last chapter, we saw how unhealed CSA can rewire your system for high self-protection—even long after the trauma is over, and even when life has become safe again. People 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, it can prevent other important parts of the nervous system from growing (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Porges 2011; Schore 2009; Siegel 2012). In other words, when your protector parts take over—especially in situations that don't need their heavy-hitting methods—other parts of you, and their related nervous system functioning, can't develop and come online. Therefore, even when you want to experience safety, presence, curiosity, and connection, you'll still feel anxious, reactive, avoidant, or shut down. Your protector parts have commandeered 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. In fact, science now shows that connecting with or growing these parts inside isn't just possible—it's an important part of healing and living life after trauma. (Dana 2018; Fisher 2017; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull and Raju 2017; Schwartz and Sweezy 2019).

Our Engager Parts—The Adult Self and Core Self

Inside the state of balanced emotional and physical regulation, safe connection with ourselves and others, curiosity, and presence with life (the window of tolerance state) lives the category of parts called *the engagers*. This category includes two specific 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 2007; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and 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 (Anderson 2021; Maté 2003 2008; Schmidt 2012; Schwartz 2021; Schwarz, Corrigan, Hull, and Raju 2017; Steele 2020)

In many ways, it's these two engager parts—your adult and core self—that have brought you to this book. They carry the quiet knowing that life can hold more than fear and self-protection. They also know that you are deserving of the safety, connection, and gentle joys they offer.

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 (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schmidt 2012; Steele 2020). Think of your adult self as a competent inner parent, or a stable and capable internal friend. This part can reasonably assess what life needs from you, using healthy judgment, healthy communication,

and effective decision-making. It's the part of yourself that keeps you organized and balanced, while navigating relationships with good people who fit you. Your inner adult gives self-reflection and good insight so you can know your true needs and grow from mistakes. The maturity of this part helps you find your right pacing, stay grounded, and navigate even tough situations.

Aisling's Story

At thirty-six, Aisling came to therapy feeling "overwhelmed by people." In her marriage, she was often resentful and bitter even though her husband "was a good guy." She was increasingly overwhelmed by her kids' frequent meltdowns, despite knowing that these were appropriate for their ages. And because she routinely dismissed her own needs, Aisling's pressure would build until she'd explode into anger. Although she really wanted better connections, this hair-trigger resentment was something she just couldn't shake.

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 and hid the abuse, until age nineteen when she told her friend Brigid. Not knowing what to say, Brigid told Aisling to forget it, that "it wasn't very 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 she 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 was growing compassion for her loyal protectors, Aisling also became curious about her inner adult. Aisling liked the idea of a life where she could read people's expectations more realistically; set healthy boundaries without guilt or fear; properly share thoughts and needs with less distrust; and be 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 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 something more: a sense of wholeness inside—a sense that you're more than your roles and achievements and that there is always a part of you that is inherently worthy and authentic.

When you connect to core self you move beyond layers of protection and all of the ways you've had to cope. Your core self is what lets you feel safe to simply be—to be seen, to be heard, to take up space because you exist. From this place, you know that deep down you will always matter—not for what you do, but simply for who you are. It's knowing there has never been another person just like you, and that under the trauma your core self remains. As trauma expert Gabor Maté (2022) affirms, even after trauma there is nothing fundamentally wrong with you. Yes, you may carry scars that need tending and transformation, but the essence at your core remains untouched by the trauma – it is intact and waiting to join you in life. I couldn't agree

more. And while for many this feels brand new—it is your birthright. It cannot be stolen or destroyed, even on the hardest day of your life.

Aisling's Core Self

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

Aisling wondered if her core self could guide her true passions - and engage them with less urgency, avoidance, or doubt. She liked the idea of her core self's creativity helping her engage new ideas without the pressure of perfection. Aisling liked thinking she could be warm and compassionate with herself and those she really loved. Maybe she could even face memories without panic and instead feel comforted by a loving presence inside. Aisling wanted to experience more relaxation and fun, have ease, and feel playful with herself and her kids. Finally, Aisling wanted more access to her wisdom and instinct, especially during complex moments in life.

In therapy and between sessions Aisling explored building her relationship with her core self 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 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 lightness and mobility.

<bh>Engager Parts: Our Late Bloomers

The adult and core self aren't just theoretical concepts—they have their own brain and body functioning too (Fisher 2017; Levine 1997; Siegel 2020; van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006). Unlike other self-parts that are active from infancy, engager parts—and their neurophysiology—need time to grow and mature (Blakemore 2018; Fisher 2017; Jensen 2015; Siegel 2013). In fact, the brain's prefrontal cortex and certain parts of the vagas nerve (that give us access to these parts) are not fully developed until our mid-twenties (Giedd 2014; Neufeld 2017; Lenárd et al. 2004; Schore 1996; Siegel 2013). And, it's through a stable upbringing (i.e., good parenting and a trauma-free childhood) that this development primarily unfolds. But for many, because of childhood trauma and neglect, these neurophysiological structures will have to develop in adulthood.

What is it specifically that grows our engager parts and that window of tolerance state that houses them? Simply put, it's good experiences our parents and important others give us—from very early life onward (Fisher 2017; Neufeld and Maté 2004; Schore 1996; Siegel 2020). In other words, these parts of self and their brain and body structures grow through steady 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; Schwartz 2021; Siegel 2012). We must experience positive attention, warmth and playfulness, proper attunement and empathy, and mature and consistent guidance (Jensen and Nutt 2015; Neufeld and Mate 2004; Schore 1994; Siegel and Payne Bryson 2011). And if we happen to experience trauma during our childhood or adolescence, our safe grown-ups must believe us, empathically and lovingly support us, and get us the right help to heal – so our healthy self-development can continue

(Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022; Perry and Szalavitz 2017; Schore 2009; Siegel 2012). As it turns out, our parents have a lot to do with the parts of ourselves we can access later in life.

What if your parents weren't available for you in 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 continue to grow throughout life because of something experts call *neuroplasticity*. Neuroplasticity is a fancy term that means even as adults, we can continue to build nervous system structures to access more balanced parts of ourselves (Doidge 2015; Siegel 2012; Schwartz 2021; Fisher 2017; Maté and Maté 2022). This process, sometimes called *developmental catch-up*, lets us finally access what we should have built during childhood—consistent connection to our adult and core selves.

<bh>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 fair and vital question. Here is the answer: As we process our trauma, we must also begin to reparent ourselves inside (Bradshaw 1990; Fisher 2017; Schmidt 2012; Steele 2020; Whitfield 1981). In other words, we offer ourselves those missing childhood experiences even though we're now adults. This doesn't mean you'll need twenty-five years like in childhood. But it does mean specific practices can help these parts grow.

Although we'll be discussing some how-tos later in the book, there is an exercise below to 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 rearing 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 very functional.

Your Engager Parts: A Five-Day Practice

How do you begin to develop your adult and core self? Although it can be very helpful to seek the support of a trained professional, you can start by using practices like the five-day process below.

To help maximize your 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 the 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, a special token you own or buy, a meaningful piece of jewelry, or simply a color, a particular shape, even a word or description you write out a cue card. Whatever it is, take your time. This is important and meaningful work. (Make sure this object is something you

can hold in your hand, not something only imagined or just on your phone or tablet.

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 enhance your connection, you can write your initial impressions in your journal using the following prompts to guide you. 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, strong, gentle, curious, wise? (If you felt fear, trepidation, anger, shame, and so on, that is likely a protector part coming forward, wary about this exercise. If the protector stepped aside for a moment, what would you be able to sense from the engager part of you?)
- How does this part seem to feel toward you (or this process today)? Does it want to support, guide, comfort, or simply be with 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 decide the way you'll relate to 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, today you can begin to consider when and where you'd like your engager part to be more present instead. In your journal, and with limited self-judgement, consider the following observations:

- 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 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?

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

Day 3—Noticing Your Speed

Earlier in the book, we 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 help a lot in the face of true threat.

But as you're building connection with your adult and core self, you'll see that they move at speeds very different from hyper- and hypoarousal—because their speed is about greater balance, presence, and steadiness. The window of tolerance is about regulation.

When protector parts have been our default for a (long) time, the brain and body can actually get used to their speeds. Therefore, at first, a more moderate pace might actually feel boring or confusing—or even unsettling or unsafe. As you start connecting with your adult or core self, you're training your nervous system to feel balanced speeds as safe and okay.

For today's exercise, visit http://www.newharbinger.com/57132 and download the "nervous system speeds" chart and the ten-minute guided audio practice to work with these speeds. Then, after this practice, reflect in your journal:

- What was my body and nervous system's reaction to today's practice? Did it feel calming, 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 ways and explain each to whatever degree you can.

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

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 these parts offer. 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 today).

- From the list, choose any five abilities of your adult or core self that appeal to you just now. In your journal, list the five you've chosen.
- Of these five, now choose and circle two that you are most interested in exploring at this stage in your healing (even if you're not sure why).
- 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 offer you, and what nervous system speed might you feel when using this? 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 in the day using your description above to guide you. Again, this doesn't have to be perfect—at all. This is just about connecting a little more with the feel and behavior of your adult or core self.
- Afterward, or at the end of the day, in your journal, write about your experience connecting with the skill and pace of this engager part. 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 your process. Choose at least three:
    - How easy or difficult was this this for me?
    - Did using the skill of this 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?
    - Did I feel less or more seen by others when using this skill of my engager part? How did that feel?
    - What felt okay enough to make me want to experiment with this engager again?
    - What might need a little tweaking in trying 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, starting 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 self 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 healing, bringing the compassion, tolerance, and wisdom you'll need.

Your adult and core self can offer your hurt child parts what they've missed for a long time now. These children inside have carried raw pain and unmet needs in a way that's unfiltered – they carry your truth. With no choice, they held trauma too big for a child—but they had to because nothing else was available. Therefore, the abilities of your engagers can begin to bring healing that wasn't available during your childhood—it's these grown-up parts that can finally help these lost and waiting children inside.

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

Key Points

- Over-protection 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, inherently worthy, and truly loving). 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, planning next steps, better emotional tolerance and pacing).

- Engager parts may seem distant or absent, but their neurophysiology can continue to grow - through proper and consistent healing practices even well into adulthood.

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 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 after trauma, these parts are not passive remnants of the past. They are alive behind the scenes, holding the record of what happened to us, what never got to happen for us , and what still longs to be completed. Meeting these child parts with patience, understanding, and the particular language they speak helps loosen blocks to healing while rebalancing how our other parts can now show up in our lives. Let's take a closer look.

The Wounded Child: The Keeper of Our 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, and powerless. It carries our raw feelings that haven't been properly seen, understood, or processed yetHowever, the unfiltered feelings of the wounded child are often quickly overshadowed by our dutiful protector parts that race to the rescue so we don't have to feel this level of vulnerability (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 throughout childhood. Before therapy, Kaley often dissociated, especially during intimacy with her wife. Sudden movements or shifts in another person's mood made her whole body brace. In staff meetings, she would freeze and go blank when given even positive feedback about her work. Kaley felt like an imposter—"a little girl pretending to be a 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 felt perpetually overwhelmed by a world that seemed "too big and too much."

Kaley's child parts were still carrying trauma-based memories—visual and body memories of fear and powerlessness. Despite being an adult, her system remained on high alert, lost in a time when she was powerless to abuse. Kaley now wanted more for herself—it was time to gently meet her wounded children inside.

The Waiting Child: The 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 - keeping track of our losses so our missing childhood needs can finally be met: a protective adult to tell, a clear acknowledgment of the trauma's impact, loving and effective support, and being truly seen and known beyond the abuse. The waiting child hopes that someone will arrive to right the wrongs of the past (Bradshaw 1990; Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021). She holds the memory of 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 made sense, discovering her waiting child surprised her. With support, she 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 possible. And she was willing to wait as long as needed.

As a part of this, Kaley faced a difficult truth: These child parts couldn't be healed by proxy. Rescuing others—or having others rescue her—couldn't substitute for tending to her own children within. Real healing had to happen through Kaley herself, guided by the truths these children carried (Bradshaw 1990; Fisher 2017; Whitfield 1987). Although deeply unfair, Kaley understood that this was the truth about picking up the pieces left by trauma.

How Child Parts Show Up

Wounded and waiting child parts can show up in both obvious and subtle ways—often when we're triggered by fear, loneliness, powerlessness, or the threat of loss. However, this is from being dysfunctional, because these important parts offer vital information about what still needs our help.

Recognizing the Wounded Child

The wounded child holds the truth of our past harms. Emotionally, she may show up as deep sorrow, grief, 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 lives in 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; 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; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; van der Kolk 2014) – this brave child part carries our 'weight'.

Recognizing the Waiting Child

The waiting child clings to hope: to be seen, heard, believed, helped, and loved just for who she is. She longs to have validation, safety, curiosity, dreams, to play, and have real connection. She may appear as a deep longing, an ongoing feeling of expectation, or a fixation on justice. She is also present when we come alive through playfulness, movement, adventure, and fun. This child needs healing too—because this brave child part carries our 'wait'.

CHART (Child Parts)

Noticing the Child Before the Protectors Swoop In

When child parts appear, they do so with raw honesty. They bring unfiltered truths – important clues - that point to what needs healing. However, our protector parts quickly read the inner child's pain and longing as danger, and then move in immediately—completely overshadowing the child's message to us. Over time, we can miss or even forget that these important inner children are even there (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021).

It's vital to catch these truths before our dutiful protectors swoop in to numb, fight, flee, submit, or seek rescue from the pain. Because a fundamental task of healing is learning to

recognize—and then gently widen—what I call *the gap*: that brief space *after* old pain is triggered, but *before* self-protection takes over (Fisher 2017; Frankl 1946; Porges 2017; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schwartz 2021).

Sarika's Story

Sarika struggled to visit her parents' house. Their relationship was good, yet Sarika always felt anxious, agitated, and even nauseous driving up their road. Before having kids, she avoided this discomfort by hosting her parents elsewhere. But as her children wanted to visit their grandparents' home, an old pain began resurfacing for Sarika.

In therapy, Sarika disclosed abuse by a teacher. At nine, she struggled with math, so her teacher offered tutoring; her parents happily agreed. Sessions began at school, but soon the teacher suggested Sarika's home, specifically their quiet rec room. By the fourth session, the teacher began abusing Sarika in a private downstairs alcove; this continued for two more sessions. During the abuse, Sarika's nervous system activated submit and freeze-shutdown defenses to help her endure. After session six, Sarika declared she no longer needed tutoring, and her parents, pleased with her improved math scores, agreed. At school Sarika now stayed near peers and safe adults, avoiding the teacher as best she could.

Because her parents deeply respected authority, Sarika never told them about what she had endured. She "moved on" knowing logically that the abuse wasn't her fault. But as she now revisited the scene of her abuse more and more, that gap between Sarika's triggered child parts (terror and powerlessness) and her protector part activation (hypervigilance and dissociating) was becoming the place to begin healing.

Distinguishing Child Parts from Protector Parts

Separating an activated child part from a reacting protector part is essential to working in the gap. It's tricky because protectors often quickly activate when a child part is triggered. Therefore, learning to notice and then gently widen this gap offers a powerful zone for repair (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021).

The Gap in Sarika's Life

Sarika learned to recognize both her wounded child parts and the protectors that rushed in to help when triggered:

• Fight showed up as anxiety to keep Sarika on guard.

• Flight generated escape plans—imagining turning the car around or claiming illness to leave early.

• Submit used guilt to make Sarika follow through with the visits promised to her kids.

• Freeze-shutdown used numbing and dissociation to help Sarika tolerate the visits.

• Please-see-me sought comfort from her husband and children afterward to fill the emptiness Sarika felt once back home.

Sarika didn't have an anxiety disorder, a fear of commitment, or a needy personality. Her protection mechanisms were blocking connection to the truth of her unhealed childhood pain.

How to Connect with Child Parts

To do this, we need to begin with acknowledgments. Your protector parts have worked very hard, for a long time, and out of very good intention. In addition, your wounded and waiting child parts have carried raw pain and deep longing for a long time and with strength and bravery. Therefore, recognizing this and then beginning to reconnect is important, and can start

slowly and gently. The wounded child part(s) needs to know the abuse was not her fault – that she was powerless to a calculating perpetrator, and that that is a fact. The wounded child needs her pain to be seen, understood, and comforted with paced presence, understanding, and compassion. Finally, the waiting child needs affirmation that her longing has been vital—it has kept a healing vision alive. She needs permission to grieve what was lost and to get curious about what life might offer now.

A starting place for this is to create a space of slowing, warmth, and exploration. It's asking the urgency of protector parts to pause – to just 'step back' and 'unblend' for a moment to allow a little space and time – while also standing by if truly needed (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schwarz et al. 2017).

Again, it cannot be overstated that having to do this may feel awkward and really unfair—none of this was your fault, and yet you're the one left to repair it. And you're right about this. It is not fair. In fact, this is one of the saddest truths of trauma healing. And, yet…here we are. However, with gentle, properly paced, and purposeful practice, healing will help you finally feel more in charge of how *you* hold your past, how *you* get to feel now, and where *you* want your life to go. In other words, you and your engager parts can learn to finally become present to offer important – and long overdue - gifts to these brave children within (Fisher 2017; Schwartz 2021; Schmidt 2009 2012; Steele 2020).

Exercise: Connecting Safely with Child Parts

The following exercise helps you begin connecting with either a wounded child 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 with a trauma-informed clinician). To support good pacing, this exercise will also use the

practice of pendulation - moving in and out of connection with an inner child in healthy and tolerable doses (Levine 1997; Levine 2010). The goal here is to go slow and not rush this process. Remember, slower is faster.

Your Practice

- **Choose the child part and its symbol**. Decide whether you'll work with a wounded or waiting child inside. 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 a word or phrase on a cue card. Allow yourself to take your time with this.
- **Space, ground, pace**. Create a quiet, comfortable space. Then, place the 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 important if doing this work on your own.
- **Attuning to your child part.** Set a twelve-minute timer. With eyes closed or softly hazed, set the intention to connect with either a wounded or waiting child. 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.
- **Locating your child part**. Notice where this child part seems to be either in or around your body. If that's difficult, imagine or simply focus on the object that represents her. Trust takes time. If protector methods activate (e.g., agitation, heaviness, resistance, fear, distraction, dissociation, and so on), acknowledge them kindly: "I see you. I know you're trying to help. I'm building gentle connection with this child. We'll go slowly. Please

step back a bit." Then return to the child.

Helpful prompts:

• When you attune to this younger part, what's one thing that happens in your body?

• What sensations, emotions, images, or thoughts arise, even subtly?

• Does the child feel open or guarded today? What mood is present?

• If this child had a body posture just now, what would it look like?

• What words would you like to offer this child? What might she want you to know?

- **Grounding and pacing with the child**. If any uncomfortable feelings rise above a 5 out of 10, you can slow down and integrate a grounding or pacing practice from chapter 2 (e.g., toning the tone of the child's feelings, fire breath for releasing different sensations that arise, heart-centered breaths for compassion toward the child, cocoon imagery for rest and containment for you or her). You can do this for a twenty to forty-five second round.
- **Pendulating**. Now, shift your awareness back into the room—notice your breathing, a pleasant scent, the music you may be playing, or a calm body sensation even if it's small. Do this for forty-five seconds, or as long as you need.
- **Repeat this process.** Be with the process as long as feels tolerable or until the alarm sounds.
- **Closing the practice**. To close the practice for today, gently return to the present: Feel the support of the chair or floor beneath you, take a slow breath in and out, then slowly open your eyes. Take your time to re-orient to the room, note today's date, your age, and your location right now. Choose two grounding practices to complete today's practice.

- **Tucking in for today**. Decide where the child's object belongs for now—kept with you, placed somewhere nearby, or tucked away safely for now. Let the child know this is not dismissal; it's a contained place rest until you meet again.
- **Journaling After the Exercise**. Within a few hours of your practice, journal using three of the following prompts of your choosing:
  - Did connecting bring up memories or images you hadn't considered in a while?
  - What emotions arose during or after the practice?
  - How did your body feel afterward (sensations, posture, energy)?
  - What specific or general thoughts did you notice during or after the practice today?
  - Did working with this child change how you view your story in any way?
  - Which protector parts hovered nearby? What might have worried them? How did you respond?
  - 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?

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 the essential (even if painful) stories of your life. By recognizing them, learning their language, and offering gentle but real space, you create a foundation for deeper healing. This is not quick or linear. However, each thoughtful step changes you inside, beginning with important trust-building.

Key Points

- The pain and unmet needs of child parts often drive feeling stuck and fuel protector part activation.

- 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 part needs recognition and compassion, not 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 healing.
- Meeting child parts with patience and their specific language loosens blocks, calms protectors, strengthens engager parts, and clarifies what still needs healing.
- Widening the gap lets you connect with child parts' needs instead of defaulting to only self-protection responses.

Part 3

Parts Work: Building Your Relationship and Synthesizing the Healing

Chapter 8

Learning the Unique Language of Your Nervous System

You now know that the parts of the brain and nervous system most impacted by trauma (lower right brain) work very differently than do the parts that use logic, self-reflection, planning, and conscious behavior choices (top left brain). 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 work—because parts of their brain and nervous system still haven't gotten the message—literally! Therefore, to more fully recover *we must also work with the deeper parts of the right brain and embodied nervous system using the language they 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 vital tool called SIBAM.

SIBAM: The Language of the Right Brain and Embodied Nervous System

SIBAM (Levine 2010) is a model that guides our work with the deeper and more rudimentary parts of the traumatized brain and body. SIBAM is an acronym where each letter represents the different ways the nervous system processes experiences, both ordinary and traumatic. The letters of SIBAM stand for: *sensations, images, body* and *behaviors*, *affect*, and *meaning-making*. Let's take a closer look at each of these five elements.

S: Sensations

Sensations might 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 sensations - both overt and subtle - that arise in the body, we gain access to all of those automatic responses that had to immobilize during trauma. Not only do we get to see how much these still shape our responses to everyday life now, but these different sensations show what still needs to be processed in our traumatized 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—even experienced clinicians—tend to skip working with sensations in favor of more logic-based material that we can quickly understand and control. But sensations in the body are wonderful breadcrumbs to guide healing because they hold solid clues about what still needs processing or 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 things like: 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, helpless, hot, jittery, loose, meh, nauseous, numb, open, pain, pounding, powerless, radiating, racing, raw, relaxed, searing, shaky, sharp, shivery, slow, soft, sore, spacey, spacious, spacy, spinny, still, stiff, tense, thick, tight, tired, tingly, warm, weary, wobbly.

Identifying sensations gives us a way to highlight inner experiences that are otherwise tough to talk about or have no clear message or story. And, anytime we feel stuck or unsure where to go in our healing work, we can always start with our inner sensations—pleasurable, difficult, or benign. These sensations can be a very helpful jumping-off point to guide the

direction for healing, and to let this happen organically. Working with sensations is a wonderful reminder that we don't need to understand something in order to heal it.

I: Imagery

Imagery in the form of mental pictures or visual impressions naturally arise in the mind. These can show up in everyday life or during trauma work—and can be specific and clear or abstract and hazy.

Imagery elements can take different forms. They can show up as mental photographs or visual memories, short mental movies or visual flashbacks, an imagined symbol or metaphor of some kind, a dreamy mental scene, a remembered dream, or even a detailed fantasy. Some images come with sounds or scents while others can feel quite random or abstract. Both versions are valid and worthy of healing work.

Images can also offer powerful clues because they can show us experiences that have been especially impactful (even if we're not sure why). Images are your nervous system's way of remembering through visual or metaphoric information. They are one way the right brain speaks to us. They offer us useful healing directions—both what still needs processing or what resources we may now need to grow.

B: 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—clues highlighting our early attempts to re-mobilize, cope, or stay safe after CSA (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, these are more than dysfunctions to be analyzed and judged, fought against, or quickly replaced.

In SIBAM, the *B* stands for *behaviors*: the overt or very subtle actions we engage in, including 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 seem random or ordinary, but during active healing they can be useful for us to follow.

Our *B*'s can include urges to: stretch or physically shift, take different body positions, stand up and move in some way, make a defensive posture, becoming stiff or still, or curl up and fold in. This can also include tiny finger movements, toe tapping, turning in certain directions, or different facial movements or expressions.

The *B*'s of SIBAM can also include behaviors such as: 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, laying 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, pulling in, purging, putting the head down, rocking, sitting stock still or stiffening, sitting up, sighing, smiling, 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*, especially *where* in the body other SIBAM elements arise. For example, where (in or around) the body an emotion, sensation, behavior or even just a felt presence of something activates? We learn to observe these with pace and curiosity instead of judgement, analysis, or intention to quickly change these.

A: Affect

The *A* of SIBAM stands for *affect*, a fancy term meaning our feelings or emotions. Again, these vital clues show what still needs healing, as well as feeling states of groundedness or pleasure that we're learning to now tolerate and even enhance. Like the other elements of SIBAM, our emotions can show up as strong or subtle, or clear or confusing. This is okay and still important to work with regardless of how they show up.

There are many emotions that arise in life and in active healing work: 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.

M: Meaning-Making

The process of making logical sense of our experiences activates the top-left and front parts of our brain to help us reflect, analyze, understand, and plan. When engaging this in our healing work, we do things like explore stories (or narratives) to better explain what happened, come to important insights and understandings, and identify a bigger context for the abuse and its impact. Here, we might also connect new ideas, identify patterns, or consider new plans or healing work.

Meaning-making is the SIBAM element people tend to be most familiar with. In fact, it's often where more traditional therapies largely start…and 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 healing, therapy must integrate methods beyond just working

with narratives, thoughts, beliefs, insights, and conscious planning (Lanius et al. 2015; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Shapiro 2018; Siegel 2012; van der Kolk 2014). And because meaning-making alone cannot heal trauma, models like SIBAM become very helpful in identifying and reintegrating all unhealed components of trauma, not just one or two.

Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) and Trauma: Why SIBAM Helps

The Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) model, created by world renowned EMDR therapy and trauma expert Dr. Francine Shapiro (2018), explains how the nervous system naturally processes different experiences we go through in life.

When functioning properly, different aspects of the brain and nervous system work together to process, resolve, and integrate life's various experiences—both positive and difficult (Kandel 2006; Levine 2015; Shapiro 2018; 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. Our AIP system has pruned away what we no longer need (the stress and upset), while keeping and properly integrating the information we do need (our positive experiences or important life lessons). Therefore, our internal AIP is a little like a psychological immune system—routinely building and repairing our psychological landscape as we encounter the ups and downs of life.

As you've learned, when an experience becomes overwhelming to the nervous system, especially during the vulnerable period of childhood development, this internal AIP system can malfunction. As a result, the parts of the brain that make more cohesive memory, complex meaning, and proper time-stamping of experiences can 'short circuit' (Lanius, Frewen, Tursich, Jetly, & McKinnon, et al. 2015; Levine 2015; Perry 2006; Schore 2012; Shapiro 2018; Siegel

2020; van der Kolk 2014). As a result, our less evolved brain structures encode only fragments —sensations, images, body experiences, and emotions—of the overwhelming experience (Levine 2015; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Perry 2006; Shapiro 2018; Siegel 2020). Without comprehensive healing, these fragments become like separate puzzle pieces that can't integrate into a more complex and accurate picture. Instead, they replay in this fragmented way even well into adulthood (Fisher 2017; Levine 2015; van der Kolk 2014). In fact, these can continue to hijack the nervous system despite undergoing respected left-brain types of therapies (Frewen and Lanius 2015; Goleman, 1995; Maté and Maté 2022; Schore 2012; Siegel 2020; van der Kolk 2014).

Lynn's Story

Lynn was realizing how her trauma-based SIBAM fragments still activated even in simple life moments. For example, whenever Lynn's son slammed their back door, the loud, sudden thud echoed deep in Lynn's chest (sensation). Next came the visual flash of her friend's childhood bedroom and the shadow of someone coming through the door (image). Lynn's heart would begin to race, her breathing would shallow, and a cold prickle would spread across the skin on her arms (body). At the same time, Lynn became frozen and still (behavior), unable to turn toward her son or call out. She also felt a combination of terror and rage (affect) even though she loved her son and knew he was a safe person. Finally, Lynn's clearer understanding (meaning making) was cut off from any larger context. She couldn't put together why her son's lumbering ways made her feel like something terrible was about to happen. Even as she began to make logical sense of this, it still didn't stop these fragments from continuing to activate.

Although we'll expand on how to work with your SIBAMs in the next two chapters, for now, just know that SIBAM's slower, nervous system (deeper brain and body-based) approach

will allow for a more comprehensive processing of these important trauma elements. It will also allow important left-brain insights to arise more organically for healing (Levine 2010; Schore 2019; van der Kolk 2014).

Getting Acquainted with SIBAM: An Exercise

Each day for the next seven days, plan two ten-minute sessions to begin learning how 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 engaging with 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

1. **Settling 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.
2. **Grounding and pacing**. Choose two grounding or pacing exercises from chapter 2 to help your nervous system settle into today's practice.
3. **Choose your target**. Choose a SIBA target that is pleasurable, neutral, or even somewhat difficult (but no more than a 4-out-of-10 distress level for now). This could be a stressful

experience from today or this week, an issue your body is dealing with, a person or animal that feels pleasing to you, a memory of a place that is 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) impacts your nervous system in a positive or difficult way.

4. **Set your timer for ten minutes and notice**. Then, with eyes open or closed, gently bring your attention to your chosen target and begin to notice (without judgement, analysis, or trying to make anything happen) one SIBA element that activates in this moment. Some questions to guide this can include:

    - What aspects of this SIBA element do I specifically notice?
    - What is its level of intensity (out of 10)?
    - How big or small is it inside?
    - Does it have movement about it or is it stock still (or does it want movement of some type)?
    - What is its speed—fast, a balanced pace, or very slow?
    - Does it have a mood or a feel about it?
    - Where does this activate in (or around) my body just now?

    Again, you're just noticing the aspects that apply to the one SIBA element of today's target. Maintain this observation for five to ten seconds.

5. **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 different sound in the room, a little bit of light entering your eyes or eyelids. Allow this

for approximately fifteen to thirty seconds. Then return to your SIBA element for another ten to twenty seconds.

6. **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 clenching in your fists; a feeling of sadness in your gut with a sensation of zoning out; a desire to tilt your head while seeing an image of your friend, and so on). If so, just allow your attention to be with one element at a time—whichever you choose, or whichever seems to get more of your attention.
7. **Following SIBA elements**. You might also notice different elements activating one after another (e.g., a feeling of lightness in your middle back leads to an image of a 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 an image of your father, and so on). If so, that's okay and it's often how the process 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 (If your nervous system is good at activating difficult SIBA elements only, move to a target that activates more pleasant or even benign SIBAs for now).
8. **Meaning-making**. When judging, analyzing, fixing, urgency, or distraction show up (and they will!), simply return to the last SIBA element of your target that you were tracking. Or you can even sit with the sensation, emotion, imagery, or body element that seems to pair with these meaning-making elements for just now (e.g., wondering *why* this element activates leads to a flutter of *images* in your head and a *sensation* of urgency in your chest you can now focus on). Whatever elements arise with meaning-making, notice one

and be slow, observant, and purposeful in your presence with this. That's all you need to do.

9. **Communicating with your SIBA element.** To help you simply stay objective and observant with an 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."
10. **Optional journaling or drawing**. If it helps, you're also welcome to write or draw what you notice throughout your SIBAM session today. Sometimes, making this process more concrete helps with slowing it down to gently focus and track. Here, you can simply mark where you feel something in your body, write down words for sensations or emotions that arise, or sketch an image that activate during each SIBA round.
11. **Closing 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.
12. **Tucking-In**. Use the tuck-in exercise from chapter 2, as well as one grounding or pacing activity to end the practice for today.

Understanding the unique language of your traumatized nervous system isn't about diagnosing what's wrong with you. Instead, it's about finally learning how to listen to the parts of you that have actually been speaking for a long time now—but in a way that's different than we're taught to hear.

As you begin to notice these SIBAM signals with more awareness, pace, and curiosity, you're opening new space for remobilizing, processing, and growth. You're also offering yourself something that was likely missing after the trauma—a gentle and patient *witness* who can finally offer you much needed space and time to simply notice, listen, and be. Here, you're

becoming that capable adult you needed all those years ago, offering the powerful and healing tools your nervous system has been waiting for. And that changes everything.

Key Points

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

Chapter Nine:

ALOW: The Practice That Pairs with SIBAM

In chapter 8, we answered the question of why SIBAM is such a vital tool for nervous system healing after CSA. In this chapter, we'll answer another important question: Once the 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 technique comes in.

ALOW is an acronym that stands for *attune*, *locate*, *observe*, and *welcome*. These four steps of ALOW pair beautifully with SIBAM because ALOW specifically guides you to sit with your different SIBAMs that come up for processing. And, although I created the acronym, its process is rooted in well-established somatic and mindfulness-based practices (Kabat-Zinn 2013; Levine and Frederick 1997; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015).

When we skillfully pair SIBAM with the practice of ALOW, three important aspects of nervous system healing can happen: discharging and completing those protection responses that immobilized during the trauma, improved adaptive information processing (AIP) to better integrate fragmented trauma elements, and finally having a patient and curious witness (your adult and core self) to validate trauma elements that have gone unacknowledged for a long time (Levine 2010; Shapiro 2018; Siegel 2012, 2020; van der Kolk 2014). Let's take a closer look.

The Functions of ALOW

Attune

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

When working with specific SIBAM elements during healing work, you can choose to attune to either positive or difficult sensations, images, body aspects, or emotions activating inside. Whatever you're attuning to, the key is to do so with patience and curiosity, letting it be to unfold naturally. It's like saying to an aspect of yourself, "I see you, it's okay, be here, take your time."

Box: One of the coolest things I've learned in my years as a therapist is the impact of attunement on the brain. In fact, many trauma and developmental experts agree that attunement, whether offered by another person or inward toward the self, can help calm 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 better regulate, heal, and grow (Siegel 2007 2020; Schore 2005; van der Kolk 2014). That's how powerful the A of ALOW can be.

Locate

As we've touched on earlier, locating involves noticing where inside (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 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 aspect take up just now?* The beautiful thing about these questions, and their answers, is that they don't have to make logical sense. We simply notice the location – that's all.

Observe

Once you've attuned to a SIBAM element and then located it in a specific or general

way, you can now begin to observe it. 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 down and letting a particular SIBAM aspect be here without agenda. Questions to help with this include: *As I observe this SIBAM element, does it move in any way, or is it stock-still? Does it have a feel or a vibe about it or does it feel more benign? Does it like being noticed or is it more remote and aloof? Do any other SIBAM elements arrive with it—a sensation, image, emotion, body posture or behavior?* A useful analogy to help you simply observe your SIBAMs is to imagine that you are a researcher in a lab studying (in other words, simply observing) this element in its natural habitat. Like a researcher, you would not bang on the glass. You would not quickly judge or analyze your subject. You wouldn't try to make it behave in some particular 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 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, *for this moment* in time, you're saying to it (silently or aloud), "You are welcome here right now...just as you are." 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 dismissed or distained since the trauma. Welcoming (again, with proper pacing) gives this element a soft place to land, without urgency, avoidance, or scorn. And because healing requires space and time, welcoming creates the conditions for this too.

Case Study: Li

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

Li's Background

Li was the daughter of immigrant parents who, themselves, endured terrible childhood poverty, neglect, and horrific cultural conflict. Because these traumas remained unhealed, it deeply affected their parenting. Although they worked hard to give Li basic life staples, emotional warmth, patience, and safety were rarely offered. Li learned quickly that her parents were easily overwhelmed so she learned to cope by staying quiet, becoming hyper-independent, and telling herself her needs shouldn't matter.

When Li was fifteen, she went to a party with a friend from school. Initially Li enjoyed chatting and dancing but as the night wore on, things shifted. Li started feeling odd and detached even though she'd had only one beer. While searching for her friend for support, Li hazily entered a back room in the house. It was there that Li was overpowered by three strange boys, and then held down and raped. Left alone in the room afterward, Li eventually became more coherent. Still unable to find her friend in the nearby rooms, Li left the party alone.

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

In her late twenties, Li tried some different therapies hoping to calm persistent anxiety, panic, and some "really dark funks" she would experience. When really overwhelmed, Li relied on self-harm to cope, while pushing herself to follow intense exercise routines or rigid eating rituals. Li also carried a confusing but deep belief that she just didn't belong in the world. And

while she knew it wasn't logical, she often saw herself as weak and cowardly. Li just couldn't shake the lingering and toxic shame that followed her everywhere she went.

While Li suspected that the rape played a role in these experiences, 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. Her therapist reassured Li that it was.

Li's Therapy

As 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 the fragmented nature of her memories would make healing really difficult. Li was reassured that vivid and detailed memories aren't necessary to proceed with trauma healing. In fact, Li learned that the SIBAM-ALOW process works beautifully with what experts call *implicit* (body-based) *memories*—general impressions, feelings and sensations, and somatic experiences. During trauma, even very early trauma, these aspects of memory still encode in the nervous system even if they're not consciously remembered (Fisher 2017; Lanius, Vermetten, and Pain 2010; Levine and Frederick 1997; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schore 2003, 2009; van der Kolk 2014), often showing up as SIBAM elements later (Levine 2010; Fisher 2017; Ogden and Fisher 2015). This is why SIBAM-ALOW is so important.

Learning 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 right where she was.

Li's SIBAM-ALOW Session

Before starting her SIBAM-ALOW session, Li's therapist pauses to 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 was normalized and Li wanted to proceed, this became the material that opened the session.

Interval 1: Before moving into deeper trauma work, Li is asked to choose a grounding exercise to start. Because of the hyperarousal Li 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 heavy 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 is 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 regulated place, Li feels ready to start some trauma processing. Li is reminded that the SIBAM-ALOW process is meant to go slow, just noticing and making space for what

shows up without overwhelming her nervous system with speed or lots of different elements at once. Li is also reminded that pendulating will be an important part of this process. Therefore, Li will be coached 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 let Li's nervous system practice re-regulating, instead of becoming stuck in only states of distress once they activate (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 6/10. Li is also reminded not to start with the worst or most intense part of the trauma, and that this may not be necessary to process the trauma. Li is quiet for a moment and then states, "I don't know why, but three starting targets are coming: when the roofie kicks in and I start to feel disconnected, the initial shock of being grabbed by those men, and not being able to find my friend and feeling so alone afterward." With support and pacing considerations, Li decides to start with the last.

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 so 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.

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 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, she notices 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 system, she ALOWs it for twenty seconds.

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, 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 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 this. 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." Subtly and slowly, Li slumps back in her seat, appearing 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 is still active, and she's especially aware of the weight in her arms, feeling able to tolerate this, Li applies a twenty-second ALOW to this particular sensation.

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 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 and slowly notice which element most gets her attention. Li states, "I don't know why, but it's that feeling and image of shame near my head." Li feels able to be with this and is invited to ALOW this just as it is. 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 overwhelmed, 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 and notice what happens. As she

does, she notices 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 sun, seeing what SIBAs might activate then. As she experiments with this, Li notices, "My body likes this. My sun is cocooning me while I'm standing in warrior. I feel a bit more steady and a little more powerful." Li ALOWs these SIBAs for a twenty-second interval. "My head actually feels 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 purposeful 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 her questions make sense, Li is asked to pause this *M* of SIBAM; they agree to save meaning-making for later in the session. Li simply continues with this particular movement, 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 her through this too. With this, Li's eyes moisten as she continues her very slow pushing motions.

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 sensation 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 arising anger. "I feel like I have words but I don't know what they are or how to let them out. I feel like they're almost just sounds."

Li and her therapist try different tones and volumes that "feel right" for her anger 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 and drinks some water.

Interval 17: After a period of rest, they attune 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. I think 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 her 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 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 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 opened separate from the rape, and many of its components 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 notices a body urge to make swatting motions with her hands, as if pushing her father toward the office window. She ALOWs ten slow and purposeful motions of this, and after a pause and 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 she realizes is relief.

Interval 20: Because Li reports feeling "about 70 percent" in her window of tolerance state, and the hour is almost complete, the therapist suggests two grounding exercises of Li's choice. They then offer the tucking-in exercise for the more intense SIBAMs that arose during the session including Li's wounded child part (from the kitchen), and protector parts (fight, freeze) that activated earlier. Li feels exhausted, but also grounded and present.

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 in order 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 also brought up that memory about my parents. I never really think about their fights, but there it was today. I'd forgotten all about that. Maybe I need to process some of that stuff too. That blows me away."

Li's therapist agrees about the power of this process and what can happen when we apply the language of SIBAM-ALOW with the nervous system's initial cues. Li finds it more organic than some other therapies she's used, and marvels at how naturally this process activated what needed mobilizing just now. Li concludes, "It actually seems easier than trying to figure it out logically—I'm exhausted, but I do feel like something has shifted. I'm not sure what, or where it will lead…but I do feel better. I'm still a bit hesitant, but I'm also more curious." Li is reminded to use her anchoring when needed, and books her next appointment to see where this leads.

Your SIBAM-ALOW Process:

After reading Li's story, you might want to experiment with SIBAM-ALOW 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 twenty to thirty seconds) for regular self check-ins.

Pacing is vital here, so it's also important to choose trauma 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 calming and regulating material, and that is

just fine too. Remember, that is also a key part of trauma healing because it helps to grow your window of tolerance and better connection with your adult and core self – important allies in your trauma work moving forward.

Finally, if you're using this process on your own, and your distress activates to a 7-out-of-10 or higher, please gently set this aside, and reach out to a trauma-informed therapist with this kind of training to support you. I also recommend professional help if you experience a lot of dissociation, if you have been diagnosed with a personality disorder, or if the material you're working with feels stuck or is not properly processing. Not everything can or should be done independently, especially more complex trauma. You are in charge of your pacing—staying mindful of your wellbeing must always come first.

If all above aspects are in place, you can begin by experimenting with the following SIBAM-ALOW steps to guide your process.

Your SIBAM-ALOW Practice

1. **Gather your resources**. There are some important worksheets to guide your process. These are important to help your pacing and practice with SIBAM-ALOW. These include: the SIBAM list, the ALOW process sheet, and the target selection sheet. All are available at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132. Printing these out and using them each time is strongly advised.
2. **Prepare your space**. Enter your safe and quiet place with the comfort elements you might like today. Ensure you won't be disturbed and that your timer is set (twenty-thirty minutes).
3. **Grounding and pacing**. 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.

4. **Anchoring**. Notice one or two calm or pleasing SIBAs that activated from your grounding or pacing. You can also choose another established 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 ALOW to anchor this in, taking your time. This will help you with pendulating as needed during this process. Like grounding and pacing, your anchor should feel at least a 7-out-of-10 strength level.
5. **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 each time you engage a SIBAM-ALOW session.
6. **Choosing your components**. Once you've selected your target issue, you can now select one component of that issue to begin with. Your target selection sheet will also guide you with this.
7. **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.
8. **Begin to ALOW your starting SIBA element(s).** With your eyes open or closed, apply the ALOW process to one activated SIBA element for approximately twenty seconds using your ALOW sheet to guide you.
9. **Self-check-ins for tracking**. After each twenty-second interval, do a self-check-in. Ask yourself, *What SIBAs am I noticing from this last interval?* You can simply notice these mentally, or you can write these out in your journal or on the SIBAM-ALOW tracking

sheet (download at http://www.newharbinger.com/57132). Notice only one or two elements and 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.

10. **Continue**. Repeat steps 8 and 9 as long as processing continues and feels tolerable.
11. **Pendulate**. Return to your chosen anchor and its specific SIBAs for pacing, regrounding, and resting when needed. This will also train your nervous system to move in and out of distressing material without becoming stuck or shut down.
12. If any self-parts activate during an interval (protector, child, or engager part) you can invite them to be present, and notice one of the SIBAs that activate with their presence. If a protector part tries to distract, freeze, or analyze the process, 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 an engager part activates, ask if it would like to connect more so with you in the moment, or stay and support you during your session. Then, you can return to your most recent SIBA element and continue.
13. **Work with defense impulses.** If an urge to mobilize 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, in a very slowed-down (or slow-motion) way – do this through repeated micro-movements until the mobilizing action feels completed for now. Enacting unfinished self-protection reactions *slowly* and *repeatedly* lets your nervous system register and then process them more thoroughly, while also not overwhelming your system (Levine and Frederick 1997; Levine 2010; Payne, Levine, and Crane-Godreau

2015). After this, return to your anchor and ALOW this for some rest and grounding. You can then return to trauma processing.

14. **Closing your practice**. When your timer sounds, or when you feel ready, return back to your anchor using SIBAM-ALOW. Allow this to ground you to at least a 6 to 7 out of ten if you can. Next, offer the tucking-in exercise to each of the SIBAs and any self-parts that activated today. End with one or two grounding or pacing exercises of your choice.
15. **Meaning-making**. At the end of the session or within a few hours, you can engage some meaning-making regarding today's process. In your journal, you can use some of the following prompts to consider: *What shifted as the session went on? What surprised me? Which child part(s) showed up and when? Which protector part(s) showed up and when? What mobilizing activated in my body? How did doing any gentle mobilizing actions feel? Were there moments when I felt blocked or stuck? What happened when I ALOWed its particular SIBA's? Was I able to connect with one of my engager part(s) for support? What was it like to pendulate between tougher material and my anchor? Where did I end off today? Where might this lead for next session? What insights or questions am I left with just now?*
16. **Aftercare**. Doing SIBAM-ALOW with an issue or trauma component can be tiring, both emotionally and physically. You and your nervous system are doing a lot of work here even if it may not seem like it. Therefore, offer yourself something really nice today like a short walk in a nice space, a favorite drink, a yoga class, a massage or body treatment, a favorite show, 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 cope all these years. Never forget to take care of you and the different parts of you in this.

Applying SIBAM-ALOW for Healing and Growth

Although we've explored SIBAM-ALOW for processing aspects of trauma, you can also use this process with a variety of other aspects too: an engager part you want to strengthen; a positive memory or experience you want to enhance inside; a relationship aspect you're struggling with; an aspect of a positive relationship (e.g., a person, animal, spiritual being) you want to strengthen inside; an element of yourself that confuses you; an element of yourself that you like or feel proud of; a protector part you want to better understand; a child part you want to better understand or connect with; a body part or pain you routinely struggle with; a body posture, position, or pose you want to understand better or strengthen; a speed in your nervous system that you want to strengthen or calm. There are many ways to use SIBAM-ALOW throughout your healing work. 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 wonderfully with the SIBAM model to help process and strengthen resources, and process trauma elements. The SIBAM-ALOW process can re-engage adaptive information processing, better integrate fragmented trauma elements, and build stronger connection with developing parts of self.
- Pendulating between anchors and trauma elements during a healing session builds grounding, pacing, and flexibility between states of upset and regulation.

- Slowly repeating protective impulses (like pushing, kicking, blocking, running motions and so on) can surface and finally be completed in a paced and controlled way.

Chapter 10

Putting It All Together

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

Reading a book like this is not just about learning new information or helpful exercises. It's also about opening up and feeling things either for the first time or after a long time. So, if you're here, it means something inside of you decided to stay with this; something inside of you wonders if there's more. And that is huge. It's evidence that an enduring part of you really does exist and has remained curious.

Finally, 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

Sometimes, after learning and 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 if you actually feel a pull to both of these 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 or still pretty self-protective, 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?*

The Cycle of Healing

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 started by practicing foundational skills of 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 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 create for 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 with only good intentions, or a more general or

abstract healing plan you hold only in your mind. Here, it's very easy to lose your footing, causing uncertainty, delay, and avoidance to develop. That's why concrete structure, clarity, and predictable pacing are vital when developing 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 important aspects of your healing. Aspects like:

- Choosing the specific piece of healing work you're ready for now
- 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 that it has different sections or segments, each with its own specific 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 one 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 (the path stones), healing sub-goals (the segments along the path), and your overall healing goal (the entire path itself). This will help keep you clear and on track, so the momentum of your work stays both balanced and healthy.

Working With Your Stone Path: An Example

Let's say one of your overall healing goals is to calm your fight protector part so you can respond to much of life now from your developing adult self. Let's also say that you've noticed your fight part activates the most whenever you feel taken advantage of—echoing themes from your CSA. In your marriage, this theme plays out primarily through arguments about fair division of labor and household chores. Currently, when this issue comes up, it's your fight part that quickly takes over, using yelling, insults, and occasional door slamming in response.

Breaking This Down

- One of your *overall* healing goals (as represented by your *entire stone path*) is to now be in your adult self much of the time. You want to do this both in everyday life and in challenging moments with others, including your partner.
- In working toward this overall goal, you're focussing on *one segment* of your healing path that has four tasks in total: slowing down your triggered hyper-aroused speed, feeling more understanding and compassion for others, staying more present to listen to another person's perspective, and reflecting this through more empathic statements and constructive communication during disagreements. Each of these comprises one stone in this healing segment.
- Right now, the one stone (of the four) you've chosen to work with holds the following healing task: 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 path stone will guide you to now:

- Hold the symbol representing your adult self while asking yourself, 'Which internal speed would this part of me feel right now', then attuning to this sensation in your body and offering three rounds of ALOWing.
- Reminding your partner of your healing task for the next month.
- Offering your partner two empathy statements reflecting your understanding that house chores were used as punishment by his critical mother during childhood, and his sensitivity about this.
- Using a slower cadence of speech, reminding your partner that your childhood was fraught with unfairness, and finding equal ground in the home is important to you.
- Take respectful breaks to offer your wounded child part five heart breaths if triggered, then returning to the conversation when ready.

Planning Your Path Stones

To help you begin to experiment with the path stone metaphor, please visit the http://www.newharbinger.com/57132. Here you will find the example Jillian's story, and how she planned two path stone tasks for an important segment of healing. You will also find the stone path planning sheet Jillian used, including helpful questions that will guide your planning process. These will guide your readiness for your tasks, and ensure they're defined in a way that's doable and clear. (An important tip: be sure to print out your planning sheet and complete it by hand—do not just do this mentally in your head or on your phone. Even with good

intentions, this is a sure-fire way to lose track, become lost, and ultimately feel defeated. Writing out goals and keeping them visually handy is a key to completing these in the ways that you need (Clear 2018).

The Resting Bench Metaphor

Every stone path must offer a place to rest along the journey. One way to do this is by installing a resting bench. This bench will be your spot (and your reminder) to pause, integrate, and restore while working through your healing tasks. You can create (mentally or in some visually concrete way) this bench with whatever specifications you like—traditional, unique, plain, fancy, off to the side, under a nearby tree, or somewhere off in the distance that's still easy to access. This bench is vital to your journey—you are welcome to pace here anytime you like.

Visiting your resting bench is not a sign of avoidance. Rather, it will offer the time your nervous system needs as you work through healing segments and specific tasks along the way. You might sit on your bench for a few minutes during a specific healing session, or for a day or week as you work through a path-stone task. You might even rest here for a season between specific stones or different healing segments. You, your adult or core self, and maybe the therapist you're working with will know when you're ready to return to your path.

It's important to remember that, after trauma, taking rest that is not about avoidance or shutdown can feel really unfamiliar and even confusing. Again, post-traumatic functioning can feel like either going all in or checking right out. So, balanced pacing (through tools like your resting bench) might feel different for you. If so, giving yourself specific permission for these healthy rest points can be important for a while (it can even become a segment of healing on your stone path).

Five Experiences Along the Healing Path

As we go through our different segments and tasks of healing, there are certain experiences that tend to arrive. These aren't necessarily signs that something's wrong or needs retooling. In fact, they're often signs that we're healing. The problem is, if we don't recognize these signs, they can become disruptive and even discouraging. Therefore, identifying them and normalizing their arrival is important. Let's take a look at each of these.

Standing on the Bridge

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

Standing on the bridge usually happens when you're either considering a new piece of healing work or you've just completed one. Here, you can feel like something has shifted and you're on the cusp of something different, but still unsure what it means or how it will look moving forward.

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; ready to leave your toxic job but still unsure how to find another.

Although being on the bridge can feel awkward and unclear, it's actually a natural place of pause—an important space for integrating, learning, and resting before your next steps arrive. It's not you being stuck, resistant, or stagnating—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 important to know the difference between being on the bridge and being stuck. When you're on the bridge, you might feel unsure, but you also feel hints of anticipation, curiosity, and even a little pride or excitement. If you're stuck, you'll feel different—like you're recycling old patterns or nervous system states that still feel pretty frustrating and blocked. When on the bridge, you feel lighter and a little expectant. Feeling stuck is more slow and heavy.

If you find yourself at a place of stuckness, it's important to know that this also isn't a failure. In fact, stuckness can mean you're bumping up against something like fear—in other words, your child or protector parts are worried about making change because learned early that change can bring trouble. Therefore, this fear might become your next healing segment.

Big Swings

When we're healing and shifting into something new, what I call *big swings* often start happening. These big swings show up when we try something new but end up overshooting in the opposite direction. Here, you and your nervous system are finding new balance by first experiencing each end of a spectrum.

Although this can feel confusing or even unsettling, such big swings are common and natural when healing (Heller and LaPierre 2012; Levine 2010; Ogden and Fisher 2015; Schwartz 2021; van der Kolk 2014). Having functioned largely at one end of a spectrum during trauma, you now overcorrect as you try to find the middle.

Examples of big swings can include 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, be patient with yourself. And, if you're overstepping a lot, you can let others know, and keep a few apologies handy as you work through this stage.

Thinking Along a Continuum

One of the themes of this book has been learning to pace yourself during healing. As you've learned, the healing process is rarely linear—it has lots of different rhythms and benchmarks to navigate. So, there will be times when you feel more solid and ready, while other times will need you to pull back a little—or a lot. To help yourself better assess the pace of these shifts, it can help to have a tool to help assess where you're at. Therefore, thinking of healing *along a continuum* is ideal in these moments - because you can measure, balance, and choose your right pace.

A continuum is like a slide rule—a clear scale to move along—adjusting as needed through different healing stages. This is especially helpful because, as you grow and change, you'll slowly move away from old rigid patterns (e.g., all-or-nothing thinking) and experiment with more and more flexibility. Although black-and-white might still be in play, you'll wonder if shades of grey can also be considered.

Healing continuums can give you guidance about what you need as you're changing, while also giving you permission to experiment with fluidity. Some healing continuum examples include:

- **Pacing**. How fast or slow will I move through a specific healing task (i.e., minutes, hours, days, weeks, or months)?
- **Intensity**. How much of my SIBAMs do I want to experience during a specific healing session (i.e., five percent, twenty percent, fifty percent), and what specific tools can help me to do this?

- **Duration**. How long will I ALOW a SIBAM experience before pendulating to something else or taking a break (i.e., twenty seconds, forty-five seconds, one minute)?
- **Targeting starting points**. When I'm doing trauma work, where in the memory do I want to start from (e.g., hours before the trauma, a day before, ten minutes after it happened, twelve hours after)? This continuum is really important because processing trauma by starting with (or even moving into) the worst part of a memory isn't necessary (or even advised) during some healing sessions.
- **Distance**. When doing a piece of healing, how far from a trauma memory do I want my perspective to be (i.e., watching it in my mind from five feet away, from the ceiling or the sky, down the street, from another town, or even a different planet)?
- **Connection**. What level of closeness or distance do I want with a particular person in my life just now (e.g., engaging with them 75, 50, 25, or 10 percent) and what might this look like as I adjust this?
- **Level of change**. How much transformation am I aiming for during a healing exercise, task, or healing segment (e.g., 20, 40, 60, or 80 percent)? What tools and healing tasks are needed for this percentage, and what would healing at this level like once completed?

At http://www.newharbinger.com/57132, you'll find different continuums, as well as guiding questions to assess different types of pacing you might need on your healing path. You can download copies to ensure they're handy as you're working through different healing aspects.

Reevaluating Your Relationships

Healing can make you more discerning about who you share your healing process with. As you shift and change, you might find yourself (wanting to) pull back from people you once turned to for support. 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, know that you don't have to leave a relationship suddenly or withdraw from your social circle entirely. But it does mean you might be getting better at assessing who can offer safe space to you, and those who cannot.

A permission that's helpful: You don't owe everyone your story; not everyone will be capable to hold it. And often, this is a reflection of where they are at in life or their journey, and not of your healing process or worthiness to make change. In fact, this awareness can be part of reclaiming something vital: building mature, capable, and loving relationships with people also able to do this. Although bittersweet, these kinds of shifts are normal and can even enhance your healing as you move along your path.

Needing a Therapist

Some people make good progress on their own for a time, especially if they have a good foundation and support. But for many survivors, especially those who've been alone with their trauma, healing in the presence of a safe and skilled professional may be needed.

Many experts agree that the right kind of therapy—that's varied and highly trauma informed—can be a life-changing resource (Fisher 2017; Levine 2010; Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Schore 2012; Siegel 2010; van der Kolk 2014). The right therapist understands the deep impact of CSA not just on the mind but also on the developing brain and nervous system. They also know what's needed for repair, and use a combination of mind and nervous system-based

therapies as part of the work (Lanius et al. 2015; van der Kolk 2014).

If the idea of therapy feels overwhelming just now, that might be an important healing segment of your path (that, ironically, you can do in therapy). Being seen in vulnerability may be very new, but it isn't weakness, a burden, or a mandate that healing must happen quickly. Researching good clinicians, reading about their approaches, and even free consultations can help you with this. Taking this step means a lot, and it can open the door to one of the most important decisions in your healing journey.

Finally, it bears repeating that 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 know that healing is not meant to erase the past. It doesn't excuse any of what happened, and it doesn't let anyone off the hook. Not at all. However, sometimes our trauma can feel like a sacred monument—a marker of a truth yet to be properly acknowledged. It can also serve as a familiar touchstone—sometimes a familiar hell can feel safer than an unfamiliar freedom. And in a strange way, holding onto trauma can actually offer a sense of safety because staying close to the pain keeps us wary and vigilant—which makes us believe we can never be hurt again.

After a long relationship with trauma, this worry makes a lot of sense—and it's something many women have as they stand at this crossroads. But these so-called secondary

gains really do come with a huge price. They keep you suffering. They keep you powerless. And they keep you stuck in the past—where the life you were meant to live never finds true footing.

Healing really is about permission. Permission to just consider. Permission to gently imagine. And permission to listen to that deeper echo inside that you still hear from time to time: that beneath the weight of the past, there is a part inside of you that remains whole and intact despite all that has happened. In fact, this is the part of you that lead you to this book. It's the part that is rooting for you to 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 at times. But it is real. And it wants to remind you again and again that you were never too damaged. That it is never too late. And that you are not meant to forever carry what was put upon you.

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

What You Learned in this Chapter

- The stone path is a metaphor for your overall healing journey in life, with specific segments of healing work, and individual path stones within these. Each path stone in a healing segment represents one specific task, making your work concrete, paced, predictable, and doable. Together each path stone will complete a segment of healing, then leading to the next segment you're ready for.
- The resting bench is a reminder that pausing to restore and integrate is essential, and is not failure, procrastination, or a sign of being stuck.

- Five common experiences along the healing path include: standing on the bridge, big swings, thinking along continuums, reevaluating relationships, and needing a skilled therapist.
- Healing is not about erasing or excusing the past—it's about reclaiming your inherent worth, wholeness, and the life you were meant to live. You are not broken, it's not too late, and you are not alone—reclaiming what was lost means coming home to yourself—gently, step by step, with safe and loving support.

Conclusion

You've arrived at the final part of this book—the conclusion. Allow me to say, I'm proud of you. I really am. You've stayed with something important here. And, not just the new information or exercises throughout this book. You've also connected with places inside that you may not have visited for a while—or ever. These are sacred but tender places that need gentle space and time. So, you've done something really good for yourself—even if you've experimented with just one or two things. Every small step creates change. And when you revisit these pages in the future (which I hope you do), you'll do it in a way that is unique to *that* time and space, and that is perfectly okay.

Your commitment to this work also highlights something else—that a key truth is starting to take root inside. The truth that no matter what happened to you as a child, there remains a part of you that is *always* alive, and whole, and hopeful. It's that core part of you that is complete and intact, that can also consider a life different from your beginnings. So even if it doesn't feel like it yet, or other parts of you are still tangled and sore, know that this core of you remains untouched by trauma…and is still inside waiting for you.

How do I know this still exists within you—that *always* part you that was born deserving, inherently special, and mattering? I know this through an experience I had watching a new life begin—and the inexplicable emergence of deep love that came with it. Let me explain.

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 children of my own, so I'd never had this experience. 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 arrive. In fact, this had been the case for my friends' first two sons, so we expected the same with their third.Were we in for a surprise! Brady did not want to wait. He 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 the three brothers (and something Brady takes pride in!). However, because of these factors, Brady's mom endured horrific and unremitting pain, while his dad (and auntie) felt worried and powerless throughout.

But here's the incredible thing. As soon as Brady entered the world and began to gently cry, something remarkable happened. All the distress, and agony, and struggle immediately dissolved. And the energy in the room became vastly different. Brady's existence had changed everything.

What I was witnessing was more than the relief of birth, or mother and baby being declared healthy. It was the arrival of a fierce and absolute love as two people met someone uniquely special—someone inherently whole, and already 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.. We didn't know anything about who Brady was or would become, or where his life path would lead. Moreover, the process of helping Brady come into the world had been incredibly painful and taxing. But in an instant, none of that mattered. It was all replaced by an immense delight in this one-and-only boy.

In the years since, we've told Brady both his birth story and also his Dad's first words to him. As he carefully took Brady from the nurse's arms and gazed down into those soft blue 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.* And they really were the truth! Brady's dad didn't mean 'you're good because you've earned belonging in our family, or proven your deservability, or shown us some unique trait to make you worthy'. He said these words because of an undeniable truth about his brand-new son: '*You are whole simply because you exist. You and your life matter just because you are you. Nothing that happens will ever change that. The world is now better because you are here.'*

In fact, had the nurse taken my friends to the nursery and said, "Take your pick. They're exactly the same—tiny, bald, and crying," my friends would have chosen Brady without a moment's hesitation. Because they knew, deep in their bones, that their child is *not* interchangeable. There is not another person just like Brady, and there never would be again. He is one of a kind. And…

They get to love him.

They get to witness his unique life.

They know how lucky they are.

All Babies Are Born Special, But Not All Will Know It

There was another experience after Brady's birth that showed how this can go awry. When Brady and his mom were moved to their hospital room, their roommate was a new 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 already felt at the thought of another child. Their tone throughout was dismissive and removed.

As we heard these new parents, our hearts broke for this baby. Because even though she was as amazing, and unique, and deserving as Brady, she would likely struggle to know this about herself. And not because there was (or would be) some game-changing flaw about her. But simply because her parents were struggling to see the inherently *good girl* who was now theirs. And should trauma also be in this little girl's future, her parents might continue to struggle to attune to her,or give her the kind of support she will desperately need. They'll struggle to remind her that no matter what, she always matters, she is always deserving, and the essence of her will always be whole. This *will* be the truth about her, but she may never learn to *feel* it…. And that will change everything.

This story is important because it is also *your* story. You also have that deep part of you that made you *perfectly whole and good* before you ever said a word, before you showed any specific abilities, or before you took up the tasks of your life. This core and enduring 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, just like those deprived kittens blind to horizontal lines, you won't be able to feel this truth about you. And that is monumental after trauma.

That's why healing isn't only about coping, and strategies, or processing trauma. It's also about *reclaiming*—reclaiming who you *still* really are inside. It's remembering that underneath everything that happened and all those layers that helped you cope and survive, there's a part of

you that remains untouched—and who's still able to connect to safety, gentle joys, real purpose, and healthy love. It's the part of you waiting to take up your true life path.

As you continue to do your healing work, you'll notice glimmers of this enduring part of you—soft moments of self-compassion, a growing patience with a difficult emotion, or a flicker of calm or hope that suddenly surprises you. When you do, pause and notice. This is who you are *beyond* trauma. This is you moving closer.

Of course, there will be days when you forget. Days when your protector parts take over despite your better intentions. There will be days when the weight of the child inside feels heavy and alone. So, on those days, please let these words find you, and let this book offer a soft light to guide you.

And when you, once again, experience that tiny flicker inside, you can softly whisper:

I see you there.

I'm learning to come home to you.

I am finally reclaiming the always *part of me.*

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