

INTENTIONAL INTIMACY

*Develop a deeper connection with God and church community
by working through past and present struggles
with love, sex, and relationships.*

GROUP GUIDELINES

- **Confidentiality is essential** (what is said within the group is not shared outside of the group)
- **Speak only for yourself** (do not give advice or speak on behalf of other members; it is important to allow others to share without judgmental comments)
- **Respect others** (allow members to find their own answers and limit side conversations; limit sharing so that everyone has time to share)
- **Start and end on time** (respect everyone's time)
- **Take responsibility** (if you feel uncomfortable with anything happening in the group or among group members, share your concern with the group, your leader or co-leaders, or someone on church staff)

GROUP EXPECTATIONS

Every lesson contains reading and questions to complete over the course of six weeks. Each week, all group members will read through the introduction of the lesson together. Then, complete the application questions individually before sharing them with the group. When sharing application questions, it is suggested to split into smaller groups of 3 to 4 people. These smaller groups should remain consistent throughout the six weeks. It is also suggested that smaller groups separate by gender to create a more comfortable space for sharing. If time allows, groups may also complete the reflection section together, or individuals may complete this section on their own after the group concludes.

Remember, what each member gets out of this study is equivalent to how much effort and commitment they are willing to put into it.

Please sign below, indicating that you have read and understand the guidelines and expectations amongst group members.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

WEEK 1 | **Our Shared Struggle**

WEEK 2 | **Our Need for Love**

WEEK 3 | **Our Need to Survive**

WEEK 4 | **Our Need for Renewal**

WEEK 5 | **Our Need to Understand**

WEEK 6 | **Our Need to Connect**

This study takes a deeper look at our basic needs connected to love, sex, and relationships in order to create a shift in these areas of your life. We aim to understand ourselves more deeply so we can bring more of our whole selves to God and others—every part of us!

1 / OUR SHARED STRUGGLE

Though we all have our unique individual stories, we all have a shared struggle with sin.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6:12-14

In our Christian walks, a tension surfaces between what God has already accomplished for us through Christ on the Cross and our responsibility to obey the teachings of Christ. We are continually tempted by desires to sin, and find that each day we must give ourselves anew to God. But “sin will have no dominion over you” is not a command, it is a promise that sin will not triumph in your life.

Since, as believers, we have died with Christ. We now have the freedom to choose what is good.

Even so, distorted desires reject the way in which God reveals Himself and the way He asks to be worshiped. Relational or sexual sin can interfere with one’s relationship with God, even taking His place in our hearts as a focus of devotion. Since Christ is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), all other ways to God are false. So, when we turn towards sin, we turn away from our holy God. In doing so, our fellowship with God and with one another is also distorted.

But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:7-9

To “walk in the light” means to reflect God’s character within the world. The symbolism of light as knowledge also implies that when Christians “walk in the light” their lives will be known, and will not contain hidden sins, falsehoods, or deception. Such walking “in the light” can result in deep divine and human fellowship (1 John 1:3).

One way to determine if we are in a healthy place or not—if we are continuing to “walk in the light”—is by the decisions we make about sex and relationships.

As we begin to explore what life could look like without unwanted or unhealthy behaviors that cause disconnection between us and others, we need to remind ourselves of the truth that God reveals to us about ourselves. When working through parts of our past and present struggles, know that isn’t your true self...

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9-10

You are no longer the same person entrapped by sin and shame. God has chosen you for something better. He has chosen to give you true life, not death, and to replace your darkness with light. God renews his mercy for you, every day, because you are valued by Him, beloved, and created to be in connection with other people who share that same mercy and compassion. Your primary identity is as a beloved child of God. So, in closer relationship with Him, you become even more of YOU.

Our struggle with sin is not the end of our story.

It’s vital to remember, as we go through this study, that God is...

- Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression (Num. 14:18).
- In Christ, our sins have been forgiven and there is no condemnation (Rom. 1:17).
- God’s grace flows from the essence of His being (Exo. 34:6).
- For those who hope in the Lord, He will renew their strength (Isa. 40:31).
- He “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).
- And, last but not least, He reminds us that His grace is sufficient, that His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

Your performance didn’t ultimately determine if you were a sinner—remember, we are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. Just as we aren’t rescued by our performance, but saved by God’s grace.

Why do you think many of us still struggle with the concept of earning grace?

Express some of your fears in sharing your struggles with others:

APPLICATION

We often hide from our fears, failures, and shame. We hide from the fear of feeling worthless or not being enough. We hide from the judgment and condemnation of others. We hide from ourselves—the person we see in the mirror, the person we don’t want to be alone with. And, ultimately, we hide from God, not recognizing the consequences that follow. But again, this study reflects on our struggles of love, sex, and relationships in order to create a shift within these areas of your life. Our goal of understanding ourselves more deeply is so we can bring more of our whole selves to God and others—every part of us!

When we hide our pain or shame, we display a different "part" of ourselves instead. These parts become another role we play, especially around others. We all have various parts we play at different times in our lives, and often these parts are there as a way to protect ourselves. In the table below, check the different parts you have played at different times in your life, like at church, work, or even at home. At the end, write down any additional parts you've played and the distorted beliefs that may be associated with them.

Protective Part	Distorted Belief
• Independent part	“Asking for help is a sign of weakness. I can’t depend on others, only on myself.”
• Avoidant part	“Distance protects me from getting close to people who could hurt me. Or hurt me again.”
• Controlling part	“I need to be in control so I won’t get hurt.”
• Superior part	“If I look better than others, I will be accepted.”
• Critical part	“I can’t make a mistake, or I’m a failure. If I’m a failure I may be rejected by others.”
• People-pleasing part	“I cannot say ‘no’ because I won’t be liked if I’m not needed.” Or “I want to feel accepted.”
• Vanity part	“I feel more valuable when I look good outwardly, or when I am pursued by others.”
• Rescuer part	“I feel responsible for making others happy.”
• Performer part	“My value is based on my performance and how well I measure up or compare to others.”
• Positivity part	“People only like me when I’m happy.”

Notice the underlying needs associated with our distorted beliefs. For example, some parts are seeking an alternative to being loved, powerful, or important to others. Maybe they need to be known, seen, vulnerable and still wanted. Shortcuts like people-pleasing or sex can only satisfy these needs temporarily—like taking a shot of espresso instead of getting a good night sleep. But, much like the woman at the well in John 4, we will inevitably end up confused, lonely, and craving more of the wrong thing when we can’t tell the difference between a temporary fix and what is truly satisfying.

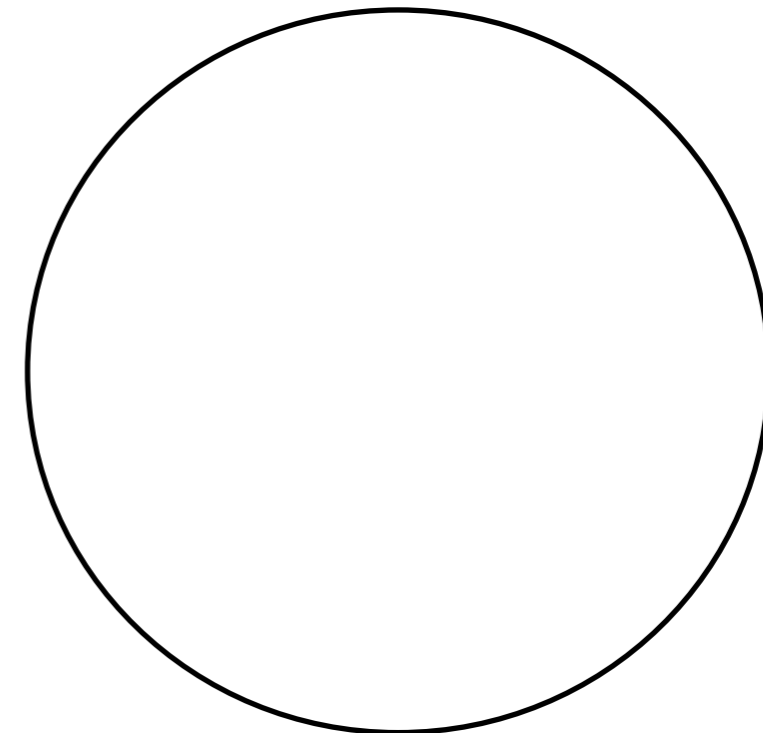
Jesus offers us a more permanent solution to our struggles, and that is life through Him. But remember, the steadfastness of one’s faith has maturity and authority that is not available to all—not to those who are unable to give up their cross and follow Him.

Then Jesus told His disciples, ‘If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.’

[Matthew 16:24-25](#)

This process is a joint effort between YOU and God. Becoming more Christlike or embracing your true identity in Christ will take a lifetime of practice in community. It’s not a single decision, it’s every decision. It’s not one day of the week, it’s a new way of life.

We are growing our self-awareness. To begin, in the circle below, draw a picture that represents one major part of yourself. For example, what do you imagine this part of yourself to look like? What image or metaphor comes to mind?



Outside the circle, write the messages you often hear from this part of yourself. What would it say to you if it could speak? What sort of things does it say, like encouragement that inspires you, or critique that shames you? After you take a moment to write down some of those messages, pause and allow yourself to sense how those messages make you feel.

REFLECTION

Checklist of Relational Struggles

This list is meant to give us a brief inventory of the deeper struggles lingering within our hearts, bodies, and minds when it comes to our walk with God. Feel free to share with your group members, or use this list as a personal reference to identify the deeper areas of your life you want to bring closer to God. If struggles come to mind that are not listed here, please write them in the blank spaces below.

Check the items on this list you find yourself struggling with in the present or past.

- I am driven by one or more compulsions (sex, food, alcohol, shopping, etc.)
- I go from over- to out-of-control in certain areas (sex, food, alcohol, shopping, etc.)
- I think my self-esteem is low
- I think that my happiness depends on having a loving relationship
- I often fantasize to avoid reality or loneliness
- I feel I need to be “good” enough to earn love from others
- I will do almost anything for that desired loving relationship
- I find it difficult to say “no” and set healthy boundaries
- I keep looking for a relationship to fill what is missing or lacking in my life
- I find myself thinking that things will (or would) be better in this new relationship
- I have always felt a distance and/or lack of love from my dad and/or mom
- I have difficulty having an intimate relationship with God
- I crave and fear intimacy at the same time
- I have used sex to get love, be in control, or get what I want
- I take responsibility for people/tasks/situations for which I am not responsible
- I have stayed in relationships after they became emotionally/physically abusive
- I often find myself preoccupied with sexual thoughts or romantic daydreams
- I have hurt others emotionally because of my sexual/romantic behavior
- I have worried about people finding out about my sexual activities
- I feel controlled by my sexual desire or fantasies of romance
- I use sex, fantasies or romance to escape my problems
- The internet has created dating or sexual problems for me
- I spend too much time online or with other materials for dating or sexual purposes
- I have been romantically involved with inappropriate people (i.e. boss, married, etc.)
- When I have sex or am involved with a sexual activity, I often feel depressed afterwards
- I have become emotionally or sexually involved with people I don’t know
- My sexual behavior has caused problems for myself or those I love
- I have had multiple romantic or sexual relationships at the same time
- I believe casual sex keeps me from having more long-term intimate relationships
- Sometimes, my emotions feels stronger than I am
- _____
- _____
- _____

As you take inventory of these struggles, remember that wanting to dismiss, avoid or hide our struggles is nothing new—it has been a part of human behavior since the beginning of existence. We see the first example of this in Genesis 3, where the serpent tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. After eating and sharing with her husband, it is written, “At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness” (Gen. 3:7). When God came looking for them, they hid from God. For the first time, they felt shame, and it led them fearfully into isolation.

But hiding struggles only strengthens them. Instead, to strengthen ourselves, we need to take the strongholds of our life out of the darkness and hold them into the light.

My thoughts, feelings, and reactions when filling out this checklist:

2 / OUR NEED FOR LOVE

INTRODUCTION

A major way our past influences us in the present is the way we view and maintain expectations of other people. **Attachment theory** explains how early relationships affect the way we experience relationships as adults. It explains how experiences we thought were left in the past are, once again, deeply wired into our minds and bodies.

Attachment theory claims that from birth our parents help regulate our internal emotional states (meaning they help us control our emotions so we're not overwhelmed by them). We curate a template of different beliefs and expectations from our relationships starting from the moment we enter the world. Imagine a baby crying and a mom soothing him into peaceful sleep. These experiences of co-regulating with our caregiver actually shapes the meaning of our experiences for us, because child and parent experience an intimate connection that gives the infant a sense of security. When these experiences are consistent, that infant begins to anticipate that when he cries, mom will answer!

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.
1 John 4:11-12

Repeated experiences of care as a child form what is called a **“secure base”** in attachment theory. A secure base is an internal model of security (an embodied feeling of being safe), which enables children to develop well, be curious and explore the world around them. Secure attachments occur when kids have consistent, emotionally aware, and communicative caregivers.

But some caregivers are not able to give a child the experiences of connection and safety necessary for them to develop a secure attachment. Maybe their circumstances don't allow for it, or maybe they never received it themselves. When this happens, that child has an insecure attachment, meaning he

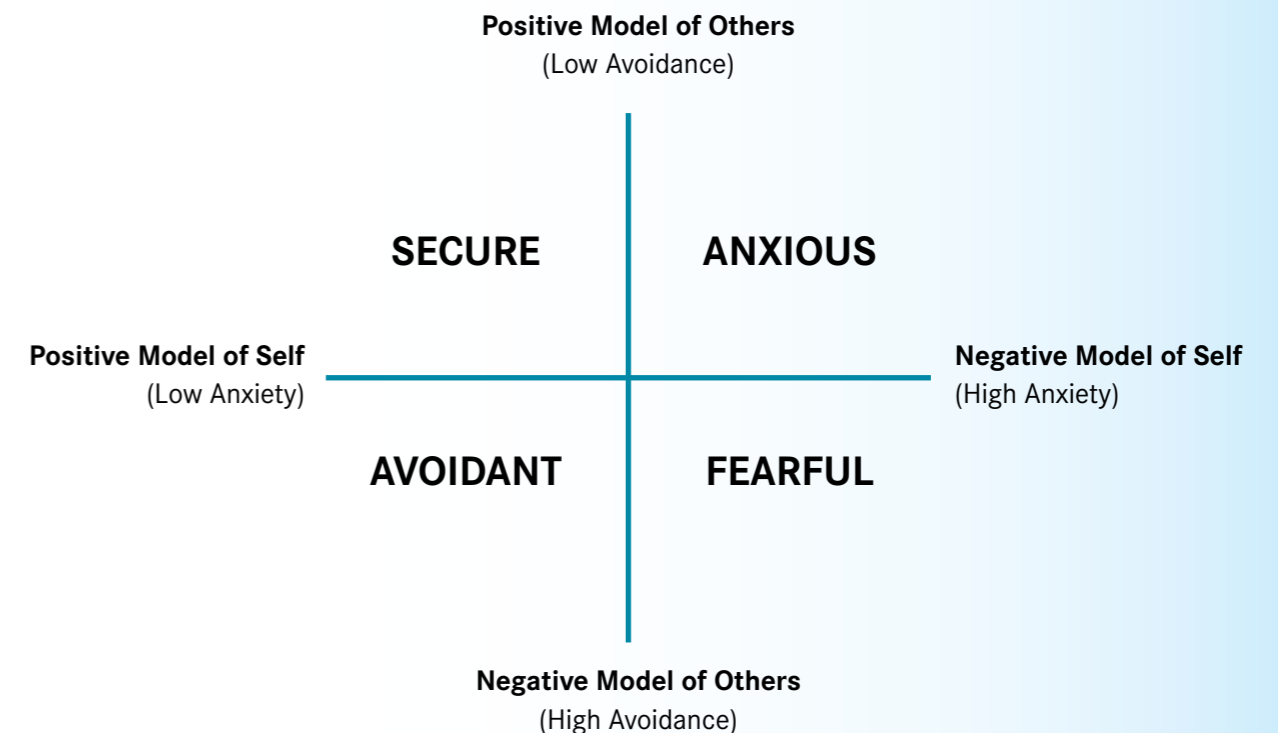
or she may feel less safe in the world or when interacting with others. These insecurities can show up differently in different people, but can ultimately be seen in the way a person is overly anxious or overly-dependent. The belief that the world is a safe, predictable place has been replaced with the feeling that the world is dangerous and fickle, unreliable and unsafe.

And we don't just think these things, we sense them with our bodies. Without a secure base, there may be no internal sense that there will be enough within yourself or support outside of yourself to sustain you. There is a missing sense of resilience. Whether we have attained this foundational sense of security and resilience also affects our faith.

Author and Professor of Psychology at Abilene Christian University, Richard Beck, went a bit further in his church by actually studying how one's attachment might affect the way one views God. In his 2006 article in the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* titled “God as a Secure Base: Attachment to God and Theological Exploration,” Beck discovered some interesting trends in believers.

He found that securely attached believers had a healthy view of themselves and a healthy view of God, who was experienced as trustworthy and dependable. However, those with anxious attachments tended to have a positive view of God but a negative view of self, meaning they didn't feel “good enough” or felt guilty, shameful, and “bad.” They craved intimacy with God but did not feel it was safe since it depended on a need to perform. Avoidant attachments typically had a positive view of themselves but a negative view of God, meaning they were more self-reliant and less willing to depend on God. And, finally, those with fearful attachments had both a negative view of themselves and of God. Thus, they were constantly in an approach-avoidance crisis of faith, fearing abandonment by God while also rejecting His intimacy.

Below is a graph that sums up how our attachment frameworks may influence our view of self or others. Don't forget, God is included in that “others” category!



We are on the receiving end of perfect love. But sometimes, to experience that love more fully, we have to give our personal histories and emotional experiences more attention.

Our internal models can be changed or repaired. We can “earn” a secure attachment as an adult even if we didn't receive it as a child. We can do this by creating meaningful emotional relationships with a close friend, significant other, or therapist. Because of new nurturing connections, you are more able to create a healthier “inner voice.” One that sounds like the parent you needed—kind, gentle, compassionate, and aware. And then, you are able to more clearly understand and communicate your story and experiences.

APPLICATION

What adjectives would you use to describe your caregivers when you were young?

Your parents or main caregivers helped form your inner “relationship template.” In the table below, list those individuals, and describe an accompanying experience that may have contributed to a sense of security or insecurity in your life. After, in the final column, mark down the feelings you had back then, as well as the feelings you have in the present moment while remembering.

Person	Adverse Experience	Feelings (past / present)
1)		
2)		
3)		

All of us tend to have a primary attachment style with those we are closest with. But our internal attachment templates aren't static categories. That means, depending on who we are interacting with, our bodies may come to expect different responses. Below is a chart that lists some characteristics of a secure attachment, as well as insecure attachment styles including preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful-avoidant.

Autonomous (Secure)	Preoccupied (Anxious)	Dismissive (Avoidant)	Fearful-Avoidant (Disorganized)
Interdependent and able to connect with others and themselves.	Desire validation and closeness. Are most afraid of abandonment.	Self-reliant. Afraid of feeling “engulfed” by other people.	Desire to connect to others but fear being used and hurt.
Can acknowledge their own faults while also hearing their partners’ concerns.	Are typically triggered by conflict and react by wanting more closeness.	Are emotionally disconnected. Tend to be more critical of others and less of themselves.	Tend to see themselves as defective and others as scary.
Are able to stay emotionally regulated in everyday situations involving relationships.	Tend to be emotionally dysregulated, when fearing relational disconnection.	Typically triggered by conflict; react by isolating to try to self-regulate.	Tend to be emotionally dysregulated, which may result in dissociation.
Able to more accurately assess whether a person is safe or reliable based on previous experiences.	Hypercritical of self but more apt to see others as “good”. May appear controlling or demanding of others.	May feel uncomfortable providing emotional support to others, or feel less obligated to do so.	In relationships, may experience feelings similar to terror felt in childhood (often have abusive histories).

Which of these styles do you find most accurately describes how you feel in your closest relationships? What adjectives would you describe yourself with today?

REFLECTION

We see that, if at any point during development children experience untrustworthiness, disengagement, or mistreatment from their caregivers without appropriate repair, their attachment style may be affected. No longer will these kids feel there is a safe shelter to return to, or a safe base from which to explore the world. They may begin to adapt with a “white-knuckling” approach to life. The narrative that they must act okay, succeed on their own, suppress emotions, not make mistakes, and/or sacrifice feeling safe just to be loved truly begins to take root.

If there is one thing attachment demonstrates, it’s that we all have an inherent need to be loved and to love others. God designed us for relationship, but He also created us in a way in which we thrive on healthy treatment in relationships. We thrive on calmness, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness.

That’s why it’s so important to understand that God is trustworthy, merciful, compassionate, loving, faithful, and good. To know that our Father in Heaven has not only created us to experience the type of love that He offers, but that we are at our best when we experience it and let it rewire our minds and hearts! When we give our lives over to the salvation of Jesus Christ, and allow ourselves to engage in the type of lifestyle and relationships He has described for us in Scripture, we begin that repair process that heals our insecurities and imperfect pasts.

How might your past experiences with your family influence your faith now?

We love because God first loved us. We heal as we continue to experience the love He intended for us. To close this lesson, please read 1 Corinthians 13.

3 / OUR NEED TO SURVIVE

We all, at one point in our lives, will struggle with pain, grief and loss, feelings of deep sadness or high stress, anxiety, and so forth. Our resilience is our capacity to withstand or recover from these difficulties. But resilience is not something you have or not, it is a set of strategies that can be learned and practiced when overcoming these difficulties. In life, the question is not whether we want to change, but how we want to change.

Sometimes this change process is a means of growing up, transforming into the adult we imagined ourselves to be, or walking with Christ closer than we did as a new believer. This process can also include adapting to painful things, like building a new life and routine without a certain loved one, breaking bad habits, or coping with a childhood filled with memories of physical or emotional abuse.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.
Galatians 5:22-25

In all of our lives, there are experiences that have changed us in both positive or negative ways. For some, those past experiences also involve some level of trauma.

Bessel van der Kolk, a famous psychiatrist, author and researcher, defines a traumatic experience as an event that “overwhelms one’s capacity to cope.” More than that, he writes in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way the mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think.”

There are multiple ways we can experience trauma, but the two main types of trauma are known as either a single-event trauma or complex trauma.

A single-event trauma can include things such as a car accident, a natural disaster, or even an unexpected medical procedure. Events that are contained in a single experience or moment in time.

Complex trauma, on the other hand, is typically the result of exposure to repeated or prolonged forms of interpersonal trauma, often occurring under circumstances where escape is not possible due to physical, psychological, maturational, family, environmental, or social constraints. Complex trauma situations include a lot of developmental stressors, things like violence in the household, physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect.

On a physical level, one way trauma impacts the body is as a form of toxic stress. Toxic stress is the repeated over-activation of the brain's stress response system. Enduring adverse experiences can cause children to experience this **toxic stress**—a chronic state of survival mode, where one learns reactionary coping mechanisms like lashing out (fight), running away (flight), shutting down (freeze), or even people-pleasing (fawn). This type of stress can wire young brains for reaction because they’re so focused on survival.

Symptoms of trauma may occur immediately or can emerge over time from the compounding stress and challenges of processing and adapting to difficult experiences in life. Symptoms of trauma emerge as the body and the mind attempt to cope with and resolve these stressors. Trauma is thus not so much the event itself but actually our experience of the event, and how it impacted us physically, emotionally, psychologically, and relationally.

The effects of trauma might look like:

- **Physical symptoms** such as headaches, dizziness, tightness in the body, muscle tension, digestion challenges, and constrictions around the breath.
- **Emotional symptoms** such as flatness / inability to feel, fear, anxiety, panic, overwhelm, loss of choice, difficulty feeling comforted, anger, and shame.
- **Psychological symptoms** such as dissociation (which is a feeling of being disconnected from ourselves), mental rumination, low self worth, negative self talk, self blame, memory challenges, depression, and loss of interest in activities.
- **Social symptoms** such as isolation, loneliness, relational and attachment reenactments.

In many ways, painful past experiences can interfere with our ability to feel present or connected with others. As you can see, we don’t enter into any new environment or relationship without the weight of our past experiences, since they play a big part in how we interpret new ones.

But there is hope. No matter how painful or difficult something was in the past, we have the power to transform and redeem it in the present. The first step is to bring those unknown parts of ourselves into the light, which is why we reflect with curiosity on how they continue to impact us today. The next step is to show these parts compassion, as we start to see ourselves and our strength to endure in a new way. We begin to see ourselves and others as God see us, giving space to let light into what were once dark places.

APPLICATION

What are your thoughts concerning the description of trauma listed above?

We can find ourselves being pulled back into an uncomfortable feeling or sensation connected to past trauma when feeling “triggered.” **A trigger** is a stimulus (like a person, place, situation, or thing) that prompts an involuntary recall of a previous traumatic experience or feeling. The stimulus itself does not need to be frightening or traumatic and may be only indirectly or superficially reminiscent of an earlier incident, such as a scent or piece of clothing. But it triggers the unconscious part of our brain where the trauma memory is stored, and in doing so, kicks our body into action—even if the threat itself is in the past and long gone! When this happens, we may feel an unexplainable desire to once again shut down, run away, become angry and aggressive, or whatever else our brains and bodies can do to protect itself.

These internal processes are all very normal and also a gift from God. Without them, we might not be able to survive in a world such as this, where people cannot love perfectly and sin reigns in our hearts. But trouble comes when we don’t recognize our triggers before we bring them into a relationship, even our relationship with God. We find ourselves running into a lot of roadblocks, including in our spiritual growth, when we don’t have the resources and support necessary to recover from the ways our minds, bodies, and hearts have had to adapt in order to survive some very difficult things.

So examine in detail, and without judgment, what is happening internally. Our reactions to grief and trauma become a part of our wiring about ourselves. So, without a safe environment or safe people to connect with, we often find ourselves struggling mentally and emotionally.

Anything can become a trigger, including sights, smells, locations, objects and feelings, even things like pain, fear, anger, shame, joy and boredom. If we can recognize our arousal patterns and see where they’re coming from, then we can understand ourselves better. And when we have increased understanding, we can partner with the Holy Spirit and others in our life to also transform its power over us.

Make a list of triggers or problematic behaviors you notice in yourself. These may include situations in which your response did not match the situation (i.e. how you felt or behaved did not make sense to you or others at the time, felt like an over-reaction or an under-reaction to what was happening).

Make a list of painful relational experiences from childhood. (Refer to the previous lesson’s exercise on adverse experiences and your answers listed there.)

What do you remember thinking and/or feeling about those experiences? (Refer to the previous lesson’s exercise on adverse experiences and your answers listed there.)

In light of the first three steps, what themes stand out to you?

REFLECTION

We want to connect with God in the same way we connect with other people. But the way we experience relationships in the present are affected by our relationships in the past. Even our relationship with God can be experienced differently if we have repressed or unresolved trauma and grief. That’s just how our minds work—we are constantly adapting to the circumstances and people around us. Our bodies are persistently working to help us survive difficult things. Unfortunately, the adaptation that happens when we experience something traumatic or overwhelming can stick with us until we’re in a safe enough space to try something new. A safe enough space and with safe enough people to process that past pain and move on from it.

Once again, when stuck in unhealthy patterns that developed to cope with pain, fear, loss, stress, etc. it’s comforting to know this is not your true self...

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9-10

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.

Philippians 3:20-21

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:27

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17

How do these verses personally speak to you?

Horizontal lines for reflection notes.

4 / OUR NEED FOR RENEWAL

INTRODUCTION

Since birth, we are under constant influence. We are influenced by our families, friends, culture, companies and corporations, the internet, and personal experiences—just to name a few. Our minds learn from these influences in order to help us function and survive. God created the brain and body in such a way that it can change (which is encouraging as we go through this change process together!).

Hence, we would be foolish to not consider the way our minds have already been influenced by sinful experiences in our past.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

Our brains have the capacity to change and learn throughout our entire lifetimes. But the scary part is that our brains don't filter out what's good and what's bad for us. What we feed our brain can actually affect the way we experience good things. Because of something called neuroplasticity, our brains constantly change in healthy ways that help us learn and complete tasks more efficiently. Yet, some "supernormal stimuli" can trigger changes that influence our lives in unhealthy ways.

Neuroplasticity, at its most basic level, refers to the brain's ability to change. When you learned to ride a bike, your brain didn't just logically process the steps involved in riding a bike. Your brain actually physically changed itself into a brain built for bike-riding. It can mold and shape itself, like dough, as it responds to outside forces and experiences!

When we engage in an activity—particularly if it involves repetition or intense focus—our brains alter themselves so that they'll be better and more efficient at doing that activity the next time. Our brains create what are known as "neural pathways." The more we engage in an activity, the stronger the pathways associated with that activity become.

Basically, what you experience as getting better and better at something is actually your brain "rewiring" itself to become faster and more efficient at sending the same messages between the same neurons. Like the first time you visit a forest or mountain, there might be a barely visibly path for you to tread upon. But as you visit that some trail over and over again, that path becomes much clearer, more defined, and much easier to walk.

Hyper-sexualized content like porn can take our brains' natural stimuli—our desire for intimacy and connection, our longing to feel strong or desirable in our relationships, our interest in a particular feature or activity—and give us more quantity, more exaggerated, and more "supernormal" versions of that thing, until it can override what we think is normal, warp what we perceive as exciting, and make real intimacy seem less interesting by comparison. Once again, it is foolish of us not to consider the ways our brains have already changed due to our past exposure and experiences.

Still, despite the complexity of the human brain, one thing is clear—as human beings, we are hardwired for connection. While the importance of love and connection has been a popular topic of study for thousands of years, modern neuroscience confirms that we are neurobiologically wired to develop meaningful relationships with other humans. **But true connection is more than a bond, it's also a skill-set, a mindset and a belief system.**

Dependency needs—including our need for connection—are typically formed in childhood, where one's needs are expected to be met with enough love and attention from caregivers to feel connected, accepted, and worthwhile. But when a child doesn't feel "worth it" to their caregiver, that translates in his or her mind as "I'm unlovable."

So, you may have a belief that romantic relationships are needed in order to feel whole—to feel lovable—which is reinforced by culture, media, the internet, and even some church communities. But the truth is, there are many "right ones" out there. And relationships are more about how we can meet the needs of another person, get our own needs met, and show up with authentic vulnerability.

This can be difficult for someone with low self-worth, who may seek a relationship with someone else to heal the messed-up relationship with themselves. And this puts a lot of unreasonable expectations onto the relationship. These caretaking fantasy cravings of unconditional love and expectations are very rarely met in reality with another fallen, imperfect person. We crave the type of unconditional acceptance in a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse that ultimately only God can give.

It's important not to shame ourselves, because we likely had to survive realities that were lacking deep emotional connection growing up—realities that may have been intolerable if not for the hijacking of our own brain chemistry to take ourselves out of uncomfortable feelings of neglect. But we miss out if this becomes our main way of experiencing love.

We need to take a closer look at ourselves and our boundaries. Are we in good enough shape for a relationship or the bombardment of sexualized content we regularly feed our brains? We need to break unhealthy habits that serve only to strengthen their hold over our minds and create empty idols. We need to get back into the habit of loving and accepting our real selves, because without that, we may find it near impossible to believe that God could love us unconditionally for who we are and what we've done. And we need to interrupt unhealthy patterns of dating or sex as a means to feel whole, so that we can fully embrace our primary identity as beloved, known, and secure in Christ.

APPLICATION

To start, what are some ways you feel personally loved by God?

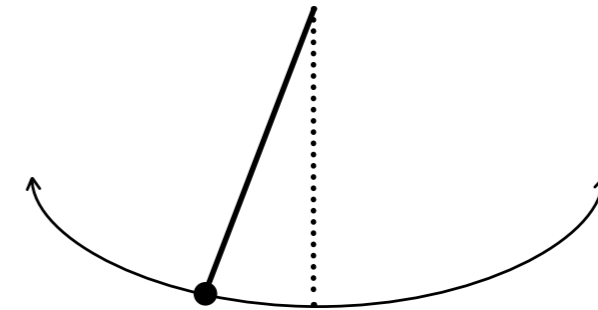
Where and/or how did you learn about emotion? And what was the emotional climate in your home while growing up?

What was communicated to you about your body or sexuality during your childhood?

How does having a deeper understanding of what's going on in your brain and body impact your perception of spiritual growth and personal transformation?

The Pendulum of Sexual Health*

Human sexuality is complex and exists on a continuum. We form rules and expectations around our sexuality based on our experiences, both positive and negative. Throughout our lifetime, the pendulum of our sexual behavior may swing back and forth. If we experienced healthy sexual relationships, our sexual perception and behaviors reflect health. If we experienced pain and trauma in our sexual experiences, our perception and behaviors can swing between extremes of “over-control” or “out-of-control.”



Over-Control	Sexual Health	Out-of-Control
Rigid	Structure	Chaotic
Excessive	Boundaries	Collapse
Isolation	Intimacy	Emotionally Absent
Depression	Expressing Needs	Excess
Fear	Sharing Needs	Anger
Obsession	Taking Responsibility	Defiant

Sexual health is characterized by manageable sexual behaviors. It includes honest and vulnerable communication, and realistic expectations of love and sex. It sees cultivating intimacy through commitment, trust, and healthy boundaries. In contrast, **over-controlling** characteristics include an aversion to anything sexual, or rigid and judgmental attitudes towards sex. It can contain extreme shame and self-loathing related to previous sexual experiences or negative perspectives of ourselves. **Out-of-control** characteristics might include things like excessive masturbation, pornography use, fantasy, multiple sexual partners, or a compulsive need for sexual satisfaction. It may include looking for a quick fix, a moment of instant gratification to mask uncomfortable emotions. Sexual aversion is based on the belief that “sex is bad and dirty,” while sexual addiction is based on the belief that “sex is my most important need.” But sexual health believes “I am created in God’s image and I am lovable. My needs can be met through an intimate, loving relationship. Sex is a part of God’s design.”

In what area(s) could you begin to change, moving towards sexual health?

REFLECTION

Now we understand how our past becomes a part of our wiring about ourselves, and this affects our sexual habits or relationship patterns. Without self-awareness, we feel it's harder to connect in a healthy and vulnerable way. But there is one more deterrent to deeper intimacy that should be mentioned, and that's shame.

Shame is one of the biggest reasons many get stuck in bad habits or addictions. We have a need to connect, but shame disconnects. Shame has nothing to do with whether you're inherently good or inherently bad, but for some reason we often fall into this line of thinking. A way of thinking that says "what you do is who you are."

"I watch porn, so I'm not worthy of God's love... I had sex before marriage, so I'm unclean... I was sexually abused, so I'm broken... I don't deserve love or a good marriage... Something's wrong with me... I just want to be alone where it's safer... I don't want to cause others more pain..."

These are not random, these are statements heard repeatedly from various men and women who have experienced pain from a past relationship or sexual abuse. Some are even messages they heard from their own Christian communities.

List any negative beliefs you hold about yourself when reviewing your past:

Three horizontal lines for writing negative beliefs.

Our response needs to shift. More messages like "What you do is not who you are," or, "What happened to you is not who you are." Because if not, shame disconnects us from our true identity in Christ—a beloved child of God.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
Romans 8:1

God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.
2 Corinthians 5:21

Which verse (either listed in this study or found elsewhere in Scripture) speaks to you in times of feeling guilt, shame, or loneliness? Which verse reminds you of God's character and His true thoughts concerning you?

Multiple horizontal lines for writing a response to the reflection question.

5 / OUR NEED TO UNDERSTAND

INTRODUCTION

“Trying harder” does not always help us heal or change faster.

Sometimes, pushing ourselves too far can actually have the opposite effect—we can find ourselves so overwhelmed that we get to the point of too low of energy and no action. Pushing ourselves too much can lead to burn out, collapse, feeling overwhelmed or helpless, or sometimes even feeling depressed and hopeless.

Aundi Kolber, a licensed counselor in the state of Colorado and author of the book *Try Softer*, writes, “We must find ways to validate that our stories are real and—although we may not like parts of them—that they are ours. Such an approach is diametrically opposed to what we’ve been taught. Instead of trying so hard to forget, we try softer by becoming engaged, attentive observers of our bodies, minds, and spirits so that we can give each of those parts what it actually needs to heal... When we deny the reality of our experiences, we don’t become more of what God designed us to be, but less.”

Our personal stories are not just simple abstract concepts or ideas, but **are the neurobiological framework through which we experience life**. Simply put, our stories—the events, emotions, sensations, ideas, and relationships we’ve experienced—are held in our minds and bodies, and they affect how we see our world.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.
Jeremiah 29:11

The internal frameworks some of us live from confirm that we are relatively safe and loved, and though we are imperfect, we are still capable. Others among us have been hardwired through our personal experiences to believe that we are not enough or that we’re shameful, unlovable, or any number of other untruths.

This is what research has shown us as well. Dr. Mary Main discovered the phenomena of the **“coherent narrative.”** Through her research, Dr. Main and her associates were able to devise an instrument called the Adult Attachment Interview to ask parents questions about their childhood. They discovered that the way parents retold their stories were the most powerful indicators of whether or not their children would grow up with a sense of secure attachment in their lives.

In other words, how they made sense of their past lives influenced how the next generation made sense of their lives as well. If the parent could share a coherent, reflective and emotionally engaged narrative about their childhood, it was more likely that their children would have a good relationship with them. **How emotionally healthy the parents were and the type of parents they became was strongly influenced by how they made sense of their childhood experiences.**

That means, if you can make sense of your story, you can change its impact on your life. It doesn’t have to control you. It doesn’t have to define you. And, once the Holy Spirit reveals a holy and gracious Father at work in your life, you aren’t making sense of your story alone.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.
1 Peter 5:10

One of the most vivid signs that an individual has been traumatized is their inability to present a coherent story of their past. Asking them to describe what happened to them as a child can be a challenge.

Their deep limbic system (the emotional powerhouse of the brain) has been traumatized in the past. This means the overwhelming experience of what happened had shut off the brain’s hippocampus (the part that is primarily responsible for learning and memory). The painful sensations and experiences flooded the amygdala and were recorded as **implicit memory** (this is unconscious, but involves procedural and emotional memory, like the memory of how our body moved and felt).

This process may block the experience from becoming **explicit memory** (a type of long-term memory that’s concerned with recollection of facts and events). So, instead of having a coherent timeline one might have a pool of emotions that feels untethered to logical reasoning. We may be reminded through body sensations or present experiences of what happened in the past (feeling triggered), but we might not be able to explain why.

For these reasons, many of us may feel certain emotions or have certain thoughts that don’t make sense to us. We might know we are valued and loved by God or by friends or family, but in our core we feel we are worthless or without value.

By reflecting on and thus gaining agency over our narratives, we are able to understand ourselves with more compassion, curiosity, and patience. The unmet needs of our past can finally be expressed (and met) in our present. We are all on a journey of understanding the various parts of ourselves that have helped us survive, have helped us love in difficult circumstances, or have protected us when we felt afraid.

APPLICATION

Begin narrating your personal history. Be sure to include these elements as you reflect, since our first experiences and past major events often impact our ongoing expectations of love, sex, and relationships.

- Your first experience or exposure to sex or sexually explicit content that you can remember, including what you were thinking or feeling at the time.

[Warning] if thinking through this experience is too painful or fearful, like in instances of unprocessed past abuse, please pause and allow yourself to share that information at another time when you are ready.

- How your family or personal background influenced your belief system as a child. This includes the most impactful moments that come to mind when you think of your relationship history. (Feel free to refer back to experiences discussed in previous lessons).
- Any current struggles with love and relationships (including family).

This can be done in list form, as a timeline, or whatever else makes it easier for you when sharing. Please keep your story precise so there is enough time for everyone.

6 / OUR NEED TO CONNECT

INTRODUCTION

So, now that we've established how love, sex, and relationships involve our personal histories, emotional struggles, physical bodies, and present behaviors, we can have a deeper understanding of how it influences our faith. It is written that God wants to share one spirit with us; that His Spirit wants to dwell closely within us. But when we engage in behavior like sex outside the holy boundaries He has set for us, it separates us from Him. Our bodies feel more comfortable with it, crave it even to unhealthy extents. It chips away at the holiness that is necessary for His nearness.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Do you know what a priest in the Old Testament had to do to enter the Holy of Holies, the place reserved for the presence of God? On only one day a year, on the Atonement Day, was the high priest even allowed to enter the Most Holy compartment of the tabernacle or of the temple. And then there was a huge cleansing ceremony you can read all about in Leviticus that he also had to complete unless he would die!

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
1 Corinthians 6:19-20

God's holiness is serious stuff. Author, poet, and Bible teacher Jackie Hill Perry writes in her book *Holier Than Thou: How God's Holiness Helps Us Trust Him*, "To say that God is holy is to say that God is God... Holiness is not an aspect of God; holy is who He is through and through. His attributes are never at odds with one another, nor do they switch places depending on God's mood; they are Him."

If we want to embrace a sacred connection with God, we need to take seriously that His love and holiness are nothing like anything else in this world. If we want to be more intimate with God, we need to recognize the ways our bodies reject instead of adjust to that holiness. If we want to experience intimacy with a holy God, then we try as much as we can to embody a holy lifestyle. To embody something is not just learning about what that thing is; it means to act in a way that allows you to personally experience it.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
Romans 12:1

The wiring in our minds and our attachment styles are not set in stone. They actually continue to change with our experiences. It may take much more conscious effort now than when we were young, but we will always have this power of change, even at the deepest level of ourselves, if in a safe place to do so.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:1-4

We need to replace our unhealthy or sinful ways with something new. Because we rely so much on those old ways to cope with pain or sustain us emotionally, we cannot simply cut them out of our life and say "good riddance, I'm done with you!" Has it ever been that easy? We still need ways to cope and sustain us in this life. Therefore, here are at least three things you should be replacing those old ways with:

- 1) The spiritual practices of Jesus
- 2) Trusted encouragement and exposure from a committed, consistent community also following after Christ
- 3) To abide in the Holy Spirit as much or as often as you can

We can have faith in Christ but still live our life as if we didn't. We can still give our allegiance to the world even though we pray to the Father and believe in the sacrifice of the Son. Because it's not easy to put down whatever "drug" was originally easing that pain. It's not easy to un-program the way of life we've adapted to while surviving in a fallen world. It takes intentional spiritual practice to be more like Christ, and less like the world. It takes intentional actions to reflect on who we are, the stories we hold within us, and how we want to share them with the people around us. It takes a lifetime of intentional discipleship to Jesus within safe community.

APPLICATION

Below is a list of spiritual practices taken from Dallas Willard’s book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. These are bodily activities that can engage and effect our whole person. Please study the list below and pick two practices you would like to incorporate into your weekly routine (one that feels easy for you to do and another that feels more difficult) for the next two months.

Disciplines of Abstinence (Self-Denial)	Disciplines of Engagement (Christ in Community)
Solitude: Refraining from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God and be found by him.	Bible Reading: Trusting the Holy Spirit-inspired words of Scripture as our guide, wisdom, and strength for life.
Silence: Not speaking in a quiet place in order to quiet our minds and whole self and attend to God’s presence. Also, not speaking so that we can listen to others and bless them.	Worship: Praising God’s greatness, goodness, and beauty in words, music, ritual, or silence (privately or in community).
Fasting: Going without food for a period of intensive prayer—may be complete or partial.	Prayer: Conversing with God about what we’re experiencing and doing together, asking for intercession, or confession.
Sabbath: Doing no work to rest in God’s person and provision; praying and playing with God and others (can try one day a week or shorter periods of time).	Soul Friendship: Engaging fellow Christians in prayerful conversation, celebrating together, or even having a regular meal together.
Secrecy: Not making our good deeds or qualities known to let God or others receive attention (see Matthew 6).	Personal Reflection: Paying attention to our inner self in order to grow in love and understanding for God, others, and self.
Submission: Not asserting ourselves in order to come under the authority, wisdom, and power of Jesus Christ as our Lord, King, and Master.	Service: Humbly serving God by overflowing with his love and compassion to others, especially those in need (can include tithing and giving).

List the name of one person or group of people who will engage with you in these new practices, as well as continue to ask accountability questions:

When stepping into closer relationship with others, feelings of loneliness are relieved, joy and celebration amongst one another is increased, and those heavy burdens we have been trying to carry on our own are suddenly much lighter. It is wonderful to be in authentic community, where we feel both fully known and fully loved.

Even so, on this earth, there is still sin in our hearts, limits to our compassion, and imperfection in our attempts to care for one another. Working with others on our transformation can sometimes lead to more experiences of frustration or pain, because none of us are perfect. None of us are God. **This journey with others will require a continual exercise of humility and forgiveness.**

As we practice forgiveness, we will be able to recall experiences of being wronged without feeling as triggered. When a painful memory resurfaces, we can acknowledge the pain, remind ourselves that it happened in the past and that we are in different circumstances in the present. Thus, forgiveness is something we can do for ourselves. We do not forgive for the offender; we forgive to free ourselves of the resentment, pain, and anger that we experienced because of the offender.

Think of a specific relationship where you have been stuck in an unhealthy place due to a lack of forgiveness. Briefly describe the situation below:

In what areas of the forgiveness process are you struggling?

What do you feel you need to move closer to forgiveness? This question does not mean you must forgive the offender right away. It is asking you to reflect on what things might still be needed for you to feel safe enough to engage in that process.

REFLECTION

True intimacy is intentional; it is a purposeful act of caring and striving for closeness. Through this study, we have discovered that transformative relationships happen over time and through the struggles of this life—not apart from them.

All the world can offer us as a substitute to true intimacy with God, other than a bit of self-care, is escapism—a distraction from the suffering of life without Christ. Whether it be sex, bingeing television, food, work, alcohol, cheap romance, shopping, serial dating, or any other means of numbing our discomfort. Our secular world view has no redemptive edge to suffering. It avoids suffering and pain at all cost.

It's important that we honor, understand and have compassion for the biological responses our bodies have due to their ability to adapt to this fallen world. How we continue to care for and use our bodies, however, will continue to influence how we think and feel spiritually. If we continue to use our bodies for things that do not glorify God or that disconnect us from Him, we will continue to feel distant from Him.

Define what a “healthy you” looks like. Imagine the version of you that God intended, the one whose needs are fully met in Christ. Filled with compassion, calm, creativity, and courage. A “you” that is connected and fully known, confident in his or her identity as “beloved.”

In quiet meditation, take ten minutes to reflect on the things preventing you from walking more closely with God and your church community. Ask for His support on this journey towards intentional intimacy with Him and others. Share your prayer with your group if possible, as well as supportive prayers for one another.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:19-25

This study guide was written by Emily Kusunoki, a counselor in Hong Kong, and is influenced by the topics of the Pure Desire ministry at Island ECC. It consists of various Scripture and mental health tools to help guide participants through very personal (and sometimes difficult) subjects. If you complete this study and feel you'd like to go deeper, consider joining a Pure Desire group at the church and/or getting in touch with a Christian therapist to continue your healing journey.
