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TAKE
YOUR
LIFE
BACK

WORKBOOK

*Five sessions to transform
your relationships with God,
yourself, and others*

STEPHEN ARTERBURN, M.Ed.
DAVID STOOP, Ph.D.

Authors of the #1-bestselling Life Recovery resources

TAKE YOUR LIFE BACK
WORKBOOK



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with Margot Starbuck



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Take Your Life Back Workbook: Five Sessions to Transform Your Relationships with God, Yourself, and Others

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A Note from the Authors

SOMETHING IN YOUR life owns you, and you're ready for a change.

Maybe it's a trauma from your past—emotional, physical, or sexual—that continues to exert influence in your life today.

Maybe it's an addiction.

Or a relationship with someone who was, or is, addicted.

Perhaps it's a current obsession.

Or maybe you're living with the fallout from a season when you made some poor choices.

Perhaps your parents weren't able to offer all that you needed—and deserved—in order to thrive.

Whatever the source of your dependency, you feel as if an external force has taken control of your life. You live with the lasting effects of unresolved wounds that interfere with your daily living. You feel caught in the grip of something beyond yourself.

You've been living *reactively* instead of *responsively*.

Though reactive living takes many forms, it is often rooted in a lack of healthy attachments in our earliest years when we

didn't bond well with our caregivers. Consequently, our impulse is to *react*—often with defensiveness, projection, blame, or shame—rather than *respond* in healthy ways.

You're ready to live differently, but until now you haven't known how.

Today you have the opportunity to take your life back.

If you're like a lot of people, you may have resisted walking the path toward redemption—until now—for fear of what it will mean for those around you.

If I'm honest about my past, you may be thinking, *it could rupture my relationships*. We understand. But this journey isn't about blaming those who came before you. It's about noticing what really happened and learning to walk in new ways.

If you're tired of living in reaction to negative power and destructive control in your life, this guide, as a companion to our book *Take Your Life Back*, can help you live the life you were meant to live. In these pages, we'll help you apply what you've learned in *Take Your Life Back* so that you can take charge of your past and your current circumstances, and you can look forward to the road ahead.

The reason we wrote *Take Your Life Back* was to show you that real and lasting change *is* possible. Not only *possible*, but also *achievable*. At some point, we all must stop *reacting* and learn how to *respond* appropriately. If your life has been hijacked, it's up to you to take it back.

Transformation won't happen just because you've been inspired by thoughts or ideas. Real change happens as you take it to the next level by doing the work of exploring what has kept you bound up. We've designed this workbook as a tool

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

to help you gain traction in your life by applying what you've learned to your unique situation. As you do, and as you *choose* to live differently, we believe that—with God's help—you will discover and walk in new freedom.

When you first make the choice to get better, it may feel uncomfortable. If you've felt that you've been without options or that healthy living is out of reach for you, you may even believe that change isn't possible. But it is.

Every person's journey looks different, and yours begins where you are right now. If you're willing to take one step at a time, we will help you learn how to

- » see your struggle from a different perspective,
- » eliminate whatever destructive force or influence has hold of your life, and
- » experience change that sets you free.

We not only believe that God's good purpose for you includes hope, meaning, and transformation, but we believe that you have what it takes to grab hold of all three. We have held you in our hearts as we've prayed over and written this book, and today we are cheering you on as you choose to do the *good*, hard work of taking your life back.

Stephen Arterburn
David Stoop

SESSION 1:
UNDERSTANDING
THE REACTIVE LIFE

Date of group meeting:

BEFORE YOUR GROUP MEETING: Read the Introduction and chapters 1–3 in *Take Your Life Back*.

Take to your group meeting:

1. *Take Your Life Back*
2. *Take Your Life Back Workbook*
3. journal (optional)
4. pen/pencil

Introduction

We'll begin this session by pausing to notice where we are and where we've been. In the introduction to *Take Your Life*

Back, Stephen Arterburn describes a force inside him that controlled everything in his life. It disabled him emotionally and wreaked havoc in his relationships. David Stoop drank and acted out throughout high school, so he also knows what it's like to have been far from God. If you've ever been in the pit, Steve and Dave know a bit about what your life has been like.

Both have dealt with deep-seated shame and have known the joy of taking their lives back by returning to the Father. David explains: "When I turned back to God, there was no shame or condemnation—only the open arms of God the Father welcoming me back." Our hope is that you will keep your eyes on that open-armed welcome and that God's acceptance of you will embolden you to do the necessary work to take your life back. This journey takes *courage*, but you are not traveling alone.

Although in the past you weren't able to change your circumstances, you can today. In fact, we're confident that meaningful change is possible and you can experience new life as you bravely face the past.

This week, we're looking at a story that Jesus told, which has come to be known as the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)—though Steve and David observe that it might just as easily be called the parable of the father's love or the parable of the angry brother. We'll also look at Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, which is based on the same story. Both the parable and the painting depict a father who is quick to forgive and embrace those who turn to him. As we approach the group discussion, remember that the Holy Spirit

will empower and embolden you as you bravely face the past and look forward to a different future.

Group Discussion

Opening Prayer

Father, you have made yourself known as one who welcomes those of us who have lost our way. We surrender ourselves to your Holy Spirit to guide our time together and grant us courage and wisdom to take our lives back. We trust that you are able to do all things according to your own purpose. Amen.

Scripture Focus

Read aloud the story of the two sons who have lost control of their lives in Luke 15:11-32. If group members are using different Bible translations, take note of any meaningful differences between translations. Do these differences offer additional insight?

Conversation Starter

Use Google Images (<https://images.google.com>) or another source to look at Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. How does Rembrandt's interpretation of the parable compare to the account in the Gospel of Luke? What parts of the story come to life, and what differences do you see?

Discussion

1. A central part of taking your life back is returning to the Father who loves you. As you think about the story that Jesus tells, how easy or difficult is it for you to see, with the eyes of your heart, the face of a gracious Father tipped

in your direction—a loving Father with arms open wide to embrace you exactly as you are and not as you “should be”? Why is it difficult, or not so difficult, for you to believe that God the Father is gracious?

2. Both the elder son and the younger son surrendered their lives to forces outside of themselves. The younger son “acted out” with wild living, and the elder son “acted in,” filling his heart with disappointment, resentment, and judgment. Which of the two brothers do you most closely identify with, and why?

- *If you connected most with the humbled son who has returned . . .*

The wayward younger son acts out by leaving home and living as he pleases. Yet, one day he wakes up cold and hungry, thinking about the warm, well-fed

servants back home. Rather than being motivated by authentic repentance, he's driven home by hunger and poverty.

What signals tell you that you're stuck? What red flags have alerted you to the reality that you are owned by something outside of—or inside—yourself? In a nutshell: What parts of your life are not working?

- *If you connected most with the elder son who stayed home . . .*

The elder son feels disappointed, frustrated, jealous, and possibly even abandoned. Far from having ownership of his own life, he lives in bondage to disillusionment and a sense of entitlement. He needs to take his life back as much as his brother does.

What signals tell you that you're stuck? What red flags have alerted you to the reality that you are owned by something outside of—or inside—yourself? In a nutshell: What parts of your life are not working?

3. Those seeking to recover from classic dependency must understand their childhood relationships to discover how their real self was lost. Those seeking to recover from secondary codependency must understand their adult relationships. Which of the following symptoms of classic dependency feel familiar to you?

- I worry about being seen as selfish or controlling.
- I worry about whether I am liked by others.
- I seek to keep the peace, even at my own expense.
- I monitor the moods of others.
- I can be too trusting of others.
- I make excuses for the behavior of other people.
- I sacrifice readily for others, but not for myself.

We gain the most traction in taking back our lives when we can identify the real ways in which our dependency is hurting us and others.

If you checked any of the boxes above, share with the group a recent example from your life.

Where in the story of your childhood do you believe this dependency might be rooted?

SESSION 1: UNDERSTANDING THE REACTIVE LIFE

4. Perhaps you were affected by secondary dependency and are now in an unhealthy relationship. If there was no serious abuse during your childhood, you may have been wounded through trauma or difficult relationships. Perhaps there was a shaming or guilt-inducing incident that rocked the core of your self-image. Or maybe a more recent issue has affected your sense of self. In any case, you see the need to take your life back.

If you're in a significant relationship with someone who is actively addicted or otherwise needy, you might be tempted to focus on his or her issues instead of your own. To what degree do you recognize an inclination toward secondary dependency? How is it expressed?

5. What efforts have you made in the past to take your life back? How do you feel when you consider the possibility of living in freedom? Do you believe it's possible? Why or why not?

6. In order to take your life back, you're invited to face the destructive behaviors that are holding you captive. These behaviors—lying, secrecy, self-sabotage, disordered eating, self-injury, substance abuse, addictive pursuits, and other traps—harm both you and your relationships.

What destructive behaviors are you able to identify in your life?

Where have these choices taken you?

Closing Prayer

Father, thank you for this opportunity to see your face and hear your voice. Confident in you and your power, we reject the lie that transformation is not possible. We offer our lives to you with the confidence that you are leading and equipping us as we purpose to take our lives back. We give you thanks in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

Questions for Personal Reflection

These questions are for you to consider on your own. Invite God to be your guide, and take all the time you need to notice what's inside of you.

- I. Steve and David identify five primary ways in which many of us have been wounded. Which of these do you most closely identify with from your experience?
 - Mental abuse*: Someone invalidated your individuality and stifled your inner life of feelings.
 - Emotional abuse*: Someone exposed you to a behavior that resulted in psychological trauma.
 - Physical abuse*: Someone caused injury or trauma through bodily contact.
 - Sexual abuse*: Someone forced undesired sexual contact on you.
 - Spiritual abuse*: Someone distorted and misused God's Word and God's name to manipulate or control you.

TAKE YOUR LIFE BACK WORKBOOK

Using the space below, record three or four concrete incidents for any of the previously mentioned woundings you endured.

2. Consider your parents or caregivers. Because it's natural for children to idealize their parents, many people assume that they deserve whatever they've received. We also tend to believe that what our parents said about us is entirely true. We've swallowed it whole. But now, as adults, we're able to assess whether what we received—attention, words, touch—were what we most needed.

Let's look at what you received from your parents. The more specific you can be, the more useful this exercise will be to you.

Ways in which my father was able to accept me fully by being present physically and emotionally	Ways in which my father was unable to accept me fully by being present physically and emotionally

SESSION 1: UNDERSTANDING THE REACTIVE LIFE

Ways in which my mother was able to accept me fully by being present physically and emotionally	Ways in which my mother was unable to accept me fully by being present physically and emotionally

As you recognize the gifts you've received from your parents, give thanks to God. And as you recognize the deficits from your early experience, surrender these to God.

3. "The starting point for understanding our woundedness is to recognize that our parents—and their parents before them—were also wounded people to some degree." We all were wounded to some extent as children, some more deeply than others. To name this truth is not to get stuck in blame; it is to acknowledge that perfect parents do not exist.

From what you know of your family's history, in what ways were your father and your mother wounded?

How was their wounding passed on to you?

4. To glimpse what it means to live from your true self, take a peek at Adam and Eve in the Garden before the first cover-up.

When we operate from our *authentic* or *true* self, there is no hiding or defensive posturing. Our true self is characterized by love, caring, vulnerability, and the capacity to form deep connections with others and with God. We're in touch with our feelings, and we accept ourselves as we are. We're free to play, be spontaneous, and care for others. Living authentically from our real self is a healthy way to live. Our real self is the self that God sees.

Using the following grid, consider the relationships you have with others—at home, at work, at church, in the community, online, and in your earlier years. Notice where you've been able to be the person God created you to be, and where you've covered up, worn masks, or sought to appear as other than you really are.

For example . . .

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RELATIONSHIP	Real Self	False Self
At church	<i>Can keep it real with my small group</i>	<i>Told people that things were great, but I've been depressed for weeks</i>
Social media	<i>Messaged Susan at a low point in my day</i>	<i>Have never once posted an unflattering picture of myself</i>

Where can you show your real self? Where do you cover up?

RELATIONSHIP	Real Self	False Self
At work		
At church		
In community		
With partner		
With kids		
With parents		
With extended family		
On social media		

If you need more space, continue this exercise in your personal journal.

Meditate

When you close your eyes, are you able to envision the Father's warm, kind, gracious countenance? Reread Luke 15:11-32 and take time to meditate on God's love for you. Picture yourself in relation to the father that Jesus describes. Use the list below to guide you and help you focus on what is real and true.

- » God's grace is sufficient.
- » God's mercy washes over you.
- » There is no shame.
- » There is no judgment.
- » There is no condemnation.
- » There is no recrimination.
- » There is no rejection.
- » There is only celebration.
- » God is moving toward you.
- » God is calling you to return home.
- » God is enfolding you with loving arms.

Focus on Scripture

Jesus told a story of a child returning to a father who is good:

He returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

LUKE 15:20

This week, as you consider the story of the father who embraces the wayward child who has come home, allow yourself to receive the love the Father has for you.

I am returning home to my Father. As I am on my way, my Father sees me coming. Filled with love and compassion, my Father runs toward me, embraces me, and kisses me.

Hold this story in your heart this week as a picture of what is true about your journey with the Father right now.

Take Your Life Back Experiment

Steve and David say that something special happens when we are courageous enough to share our pain and our destructive behaviors, and make ourselves accountable to someone in order to break free from those patterns.

Over the course of this five-week study, look for an opportunity to share your story with a trusted listener. This might be a friend, a relative, or a professional such as a counselor or a pastor with whom you can open up. Share with this safe person the story of where you've been and where you are headed.

Maybe you immediately thought of someone who could receive your story. Or maybe you'll pray about it this week and keep your eyes open for the person that God will provide. If it's difficult for you to identify a safe person, we will offer some help in session 4. But know that you don't have to travel on this journey alone.

When you meet with your safe and trusted person, use the following outline to guide your time together:

1. *Share your pain.* As you share your story with your trusted listener, let him or her know some of the tender spots from your journey.
2. *Share your response to your pain.* Are there destructive behaviors you've developed in response to your pain? Share these with your trusted listener.
3. *Pray.* Having done the brave work of sharing your story, commit it to God together in prayer.

Insights

Use this space to jot down any insights that arise during the group discussion or your time of personal reflection.