

TRY SOFTER

A Fresh Approach to Move Us out of
Anxiety, Stress, and Survival Mode—
and into a Life of Connection and Joy

AUNDI KOLBER MA
LPC

I knew that the moment I opened this book, I wouldn't be able to put it down. Aundi Kolber's words will meet you where you are, here in the present moment, shining light in the direction of connection and joy, in places where they are often a challenge to find. Her writing draws you into the depths as she gives you practical, grace-filled words of wisdom for every step. While reading this book, you will feel mirrored through Aundi's beautiful way of giving language to our experiences. You will be met in the wild of where you are while also receiving the tools you need so you can carry on for the rest of the journey.

MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS

Artist and poet

Try Softer is the book I've been searching for on the bookstore shelves. As someone who has been high-strung and "try-harder" since childhood, I've always wondered, *Why?* Why does my body feel on high alert even when my mind is quiet? Thankfully, Kolber's smart, informative approach and kind voice are here to help us all understand the complicated happenings between our heads, our hearts, and our bodies.

HAYLEY MORGAN

Author of *Preach to Yourself* and coauthor of *Wild and Free*

In a culture teeming with anxiety and feelings of being "not enough," Aundi is the friend and guide we need for this present moment. Packed with a perfect blend of relatable storytelling and practical methods, this book will be one

I return to and pass on to others. This is one of those rare lifelong reads you will pull out as a refresher course again and again.

HANNAH BRENCHEER

Author of *Come Matter Here* and *If You Find This Letter*

Far too often the Christian recipe for abundant living involves mustering up more faith, doing more for God, and trying harder to make life work. In *Try Softer*, Aundi Kolber helps readers understand why such an approach never works and invites us to a radical new way of living—compassionately connected to ourselves, God, and others. With an extraordinary blend of personal vulnerability, scriptural acumen, and compelling neuroscience, Aundi ultimately shows readers that the abundant life we long for is less about striving and all about surrender.

MICHAEL JOHN CUSICK

CEO of Restoring the Soul and author of *Surfing for God*

In *Try Softer*, licensed therapist Aundi Kolber walks us toward the gentle understanding that our scars hold clues to our wholeness. Life is hard. Pain finds us. But as we learn to pay attention to our full selves, patiently excavating compassion from the rubble of critique, we will know healing. This kind, courageous book is right on time.

SHANNAN MARTIN

Author of *The Ministry of Ordinary Places* and *Falling Free*

For those souls feeling alone in their suffering, *Try Softer* serves as a companion guide toward feeling connected and whole. Aundi Kolber's spiritual journey demonstrates that the way to transform pain is to surrender to the healing power of embodying compassion. *Try Softer* gives us faith and hope that light can be created out of darkness.

BARB MAIBERGER, MA, LPC

Founder of the Maiberger Institute, author of *EMDR Essentials: A Guide for Clients and Therapists*, and coauthor of *EMDR Therapy and Somatic Psychology: Interventions to Enhance Embodiment in Trauma Treatment*

Not since *The Body Keeps the Score* has a book made such a profound impact on my healing as a trauma survivor. *Try Softer* is a masterpiece, a seamless blend of competent clinical understanding and nurturing pastoral care. Aundi's unique dual perspective as both trauma therapist and trauma survivor gives her work an unparalleled depth of empathy, wisdom, and tenderness. She's created a powerful therapeutic tool that is an essential read not only for those who have been personally affected by trauma but also for therapists, pastors, educators, and caregivers.

STEPHANIE TAIT

Author of *The View from Rock Bottom*

Reading *Try Softer* feels a lot like exhaling. In a world that simultaneously pushes us to hustle and to hide our pain, Aundi Kolber wisely, tenderly, and skillfully offers us a new way forward. While it's certainly countercultural,

the message of *Try Softer* is both biblical and timely—a presentation of the gospel that powerfully invites us to live fully in the grace and healing Jesus freely offers.

ASHLEY ABRAMSON

Writer

For those exhausted from dragging their bodies through life and white-knuckling their way through pain, Aundi Kolber offers wise advice: Try softer. By learning to listen to your body instead of fighting it, you can become more resilient and more self-compassionate. *Try Softer* is exactly what a stressed-out world needs to hear.

STEVE WIENS

Author of *Beginnings* and *Whole*

In a world that tells us we'd better be crushing it or killing it if we want to make it, Aundi Kolber has a revolutionary approach—trying softer. With grace, wisdom, and candor, *Try Softer* gives us hope for a different way—lives of connection and attention instead of competition and distraction. If you're weary of trying so hard (who isn't?), then try softer. You'll be glad you did.

NICOLE UNICE

Pastor, counselor, and author of *The Struggle Is Real*

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*To Matia and Jude,
for lighting up my life with wonder and joy. May
you always know how deeply you are loved.*

*To Brendan,
for helping me find home again.*

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**LEARNING TO
TRY SOFTER IS NOT
A ONETIME EVENT
BUT A WAY
WE LEARN TO BE
WITH OURSELVES.**

INTRODUCTION

I'D SEEN THE SIGNS MANY times before: Hunched shoulders. Clenched fists. Heavy sighs. Apologies for not being or doing enough. I'd come to notice these cues in others—I'm a therapist after all.

But this time I was the one in need of support. I was sitting in my counseling supervisor's office, feeling suffocated and exhausted, anxious and amped up. I thought the very fiber of my soul might give out if I tried to do or figure out one more thing.

It had been a tough week.

In reality, it had been a tough year. Most of my clients were adolescent girls or adult women, all of whom seemed to be experiencing an onslaught of heartbreak. Each day I listened to their accounts of abuse and pain, trying to help these women untangle their personal stories. At times I also calmed angry parents and soothed suicidal clients. The basic rule of being a therapist is that you should never work harder than your client, but I was breaking that rule ten times over and headed straight for burnout.

The truth was, I loved my job. I loved being able to come alongside my clients and guide them through the path of deep healing. But I was in a constant state of overwhelm. Having grown up in an intensely dysfunctional and chaotic family, I never fully learned how to hold the pain of others without internalizing it. My experience had taught me I wasn't allowed to. I didn't know how to listen to my own needs or the rhythms of my body. Consequently, when stressful and difficult weeks like this arose, I dealt with them the only way I knew how—by just trying to push through them, shaming myself in the process.

“John,” I confessed to my supervisor, “I'm so worn out and tired. It just feels like no matter what I do, it's never enough. I feel like I'm failing my clients, like I'm not good enough to do this job.”

John, whom I deeply respected, was already a seasoned therapist. He exuded wisdom and calm and regularly reminded me it was okay to be imperfect. As tears ran down my cheeks, John leaned forward in his chair for a moment and took a breath. Then, slowly, he rested his elbows on his knees and steepled his fingers, the way I often did with my own clients.

“Listen, Aundi,” he said gently, “I'm curious about why you're so hard on yourself. You are providing the resources your clients need, and you are incredibly empathic. You're doing an excellent job.” He cocked his head. “What would happen if you allowed yourself to release your grip on this situation?”

The empathy in John's voice felt soothing, and a part of me wanted to wholeheartedly embrace what he was saying. The other part of me was defensive; in fact, just considering his suggestion made my pulse race. *But how will anyone be okay if I don't care all the time?* my inner critic all but screamed. *If I'm not saving them, how will they survive?*

John leaned in again, sensing my ambivalence. "I'm not asking you to *stop* caring, Aundi . . . just to change *the way* you are caring. What I mean is . . . what if—just for a change—instead of trying harder, you tried . . . *softer?*"

I've got to be honest: At first blush, John's suggestion didn't sound like an awesome option—because what did it even mean? All I had ever learned was how to try harder. If I didn't push, everything would be terrible; everything would fall apart. The suggestion that there could be another way made my body feel tense with anger, a reflection of my twelve-year-old self—a girl riddled with the toxic stress of trying to keep everything together while her home life was constantly imploding. *Sure, John, "trying softer" sounds nice, but trying harder is how you survive.*

At the same time, I had to face the facts: Trying harder wasn't really working for me anymore. The strategies I had been using my entire life—hustling, overworking, overthinking, and constantly shifting to accommodate the dysfunction that surrounded me—they had kept me alive, yes, but now they were taking their toll. I felt less in control,

not more; worse, not better; weary, not wise. The danger from my past was gone, but the patterns remained—and they were keeping me from being able to be truly present and pay attention to what matters most.

The day that I sat with John in his office totally changed the trajectory of my life because John was right: Pushing isn't always the answer.

Dear reader, there are truly times when the best, healthiest, most productive thing we can do is not to try *harder*, but rather to try *softer*: to compassionately listen to our needs so we can move through pain—and ultimately life—with more gentleness and resilience.

Perhaps you, too, know what it is like to feel overextended, overburdened, and overwrought, desperately clinging to the idea that if you just push hard enough, if you just try a little harder, you'll be able to regain control, soothe your anxious mind, and achieve some measure of success. And if you're anything like me, you may be feeling a little apprehensive: *Cool, Aundi, but I'm really busy. Who's going to do the hard stuff if I simply "try softer"? I don't wake up every morning wondering how I can sabotage my life by pushing so hard that there isn't any room for joy. It's just how it has to be.*

Friend, I hear you. But consider this: While hard work is valuable and necessary, there is a difference between pushing ourselves well and hurting ourselves by perpetuating harmful patterns.

We come by these tendencies honestly. We've learned to white-knuckle our way through life to armor up against pain and difficulty; we believe minimizing our wounds is the only way we'll be loved. We try to appear successful, productive, or simply okay on the outside, even when we're not okay on the inside. Our world overvalues productivity and others' opinions, so we learn to ignore the messages our bodies are giving us—through our emotions and physical sensations—and instead push through our pain and pretend we have it all together. Trying harder helps us feel safe in areas of our lives that may have felt overwhelming or out of control in the past.

What's more, we've been so socialized, parented, and wired to overfunction that we don't recognize when our bodies are stressed, traumatized, and exhausted until the consequences are dire. It's then, when anxiety and adrenaline have worn us down to a nub, that we may find ourselves depressed, exhausted, and disconnected.

You don't have to dismiss your pain here. You don't need to shrink it down or pretend living through it wasn't hard. You don't have to act like the shaming voices aren't still playing in your head, or like you're not still beating yourself up, or like the ways your needs were overlooked don't cut you daily. I'm not asking you to find the silver lining in your "hard." We know God is with us through it all, but that doesn't mean life hasn't cracked you open. It doesn't mean you haven't cried thousands of tears or spoken to yourself in ways you would never speak to another.

The wounds you have experienced are valid. Maybe no

one has ever said that to you, so I hope you'll receive this now: What's happened in your life matters.

I believe God's heart for us is outrageously gentle; and yet I believe He is calling us to more. While none of us are exempt from pain, we can learn to come out of survival mode and actually live. And isn't that what we all want—not to miss out on life? To have the tools, resources, and support we need to embrace the goodness? To see the people right in front of us? To live out Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor *as* ourselves (see Mark 12:31)? Imagine actually experiencing tenderness toward who you are—not just tolerating or enduring your life, your family, your relationships, your body, and your career, but truly finding ways to love and honor them.

This is what God created us for. This new way of being in the world is possible. Trying softer is the path that leads to true connection and joy. It begins when we mindfully listen to what's on the inside of us and let that influence how we look and act on the outside. It's an intentional shift toward paying compassionate attention to our own experiences and needs. Learning to try softer is not a onetime event but a way we learn to be with ourselves.

Like everything, trying softer isn't one-size-fits-all. We don't—and we shouldn't—approach it in exactly the same way either. For that reason, this book is meant not to be prescriptive but to offer you the tools and resources you can use to approach life with more self-compassion. This book

is also not intended to diagnose mental health conditions or replace the valuable work of therapy. If you discover that it is bringing up unresolved trauma, anxiety, depression, or distress in other forms, I urge you to seek professional help.¹ My goal is that you learn to see yourself as your Creator sees you: as someone with infinite value who was created to be loved. And then I want you to live from that beautiful truth.

We'll start by looking back to see why you approach life the way you do; part 1 will take you through the process of understanding what circumstances hardwired you to white-knuckle your way through life. Drawing from the work of renowned scientists such as Daniel Siegel and Stephen Porges, you'll learn about the physiology of trying softer—why your body reacts to stress the way it does and how listening to your body can help you expand your ability to cope. Part 2 will introduce you to new practices and rhythms that will enable you to try softer in different areas of your life.

Dear reader, if you're anything like me and are all about finding solutions, you may be tempted to skip ahead to part 2. That's where the good, practical stuff is, right? That's the part that really matters.

With as much love as I can possibly send your way, I'm asking you not to do that. Here's why: Understanding why you came to live and behave the way you do is critical to implementing long-term change. If you approach the practices in part 2 as if they were a prescriptive fad, you aren't likely to stick with them. After all, you won't have the context to understand what deeper issues you need to address.

This work of trying softer isn't a quick fix to solve complex issues. Like the old adage says, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime."

My friend, I want to help you learn to fish. I want you to begin to develop a new awareness of your story and your wounds so you can attend to your pain with the same tenderness God does. If you're willing to do the work, learning to try softer will be a pathway to connecting with your truest, God-given self.

My hope is that the chapters ahead will be your invitation to embrace a more robust idea of what it means to be human—a person rooted in the wisdom and goodness of Jesus.

Will this work be vulnerable? It will.

Will it cost you something? Indeed, it will.

But I promise you that this sacred work will be worth it—because *you* are worth it; every single one of us is worth it. I want you to know what it's like to be fully alive—not because you'll be perfect or because it will be easy, but because this is what we were made for: a living, breathing, moving, feeling, connected, embodied life. This—all of this—is your birthright.

This is the "try softer" life.



PART 1

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

**THE PROCESS OF
BLOOMING IS
AS VALUABLE AS
THE FLOWER IT
PRODUCES.**

CHAPTER 1

“BUT HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?”

You either walk into your story and own your truth, or you live outside of your story, hustling for your worthiness.

BRENÉ BROWN. *Rising Strong*

OLIVIA SAT ACROSS FROM ME in my counseling office and asked, “But how long will it take to feel better?” Moments before, she’d been sobbing, shoulders heaving, as she relayed the deep pain she felt after being betrayed by a loved one. Her breath had finally slowed, and she continued: “Isn’t there something I can do to get there quicker?”

Olivia and I had been working together for two months, and while she reported feeling more hopeful overall and had met a few small goals, she hadn’t yet conquered what she felt were her most significant issues.

Her question was one many of my clients have asked: *Isn’t there an easy fix to my problems? Is there any way we can just wave a magic wand and be done?*

In a word, no.

I wish I could tell you yes; I really do. I want—for you and for me—to say that there’s an easy fix, that all we have to do is follow three easy steps to truly heal. We don’t like to sit in tension or process, especially when we know it may mean harder work. (I have yet to meet a person who is excited about the arc of change required to truly grow.) But in all I’ve learned as a therapist, and in all I’ve experienced as a human in this world—often the hard way—I believe the true work is slow and deep. That’s how we’ll truly heal.¹

The work of trying softer begins when we release our desire for the quick fix and tend to the wounds underneath the surface. Otherwise, we’re going to stay stuck. When losing weight doesn’t make us feel valuable, when we discover that the people we’ve decided have all the answers are wrong, when anxiety returns minutes after we thought we’d handed our cares over to God—we may feel more hopeless than ever. This is why the ability to think about personal growth, people, issues, and relationships as a process matters a great deal. When people begin to understand that change happens in layers—and is rarely linear—it’s as if someone took a grueling weight off them. They stand a bit straighter. Often they become a touch kinder to themselves and others. It’s as if someone put a balm on their souls and gave them this message: “It takes as long as it takes. It’s okay to be unfinished. It’s absolutely normal to be imperfect. It doesn’t mean you’re doing anything wrong.”

And what’s more, God is neither surprised nor dismayed

at how slowly we progress. “We Christians, we have a saying about the Kingdom of God,” writes Sarah Bessey. “It’s now and it’s not yet. We live in a tension. It’s the tension of living our lives as Kingdom people, oriented around the life and teachings of our Jesus, a Christocentric people, in a world that is not yet redeemed. . . . It means that even though all things are made new, they are still in the process of *being made new*.”²

The tension is where the real magic happens. As we accept the idea that process is part of what it means to be human, we are less intimidated by our unmet goals and are kinder to the wounded parts of ourselves.

Personal growth is a journey, not an event. It’s a becoming. As author Brené Brown writes, “Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”³

Let’s be brave together, friend.

THE POWER OF STORY

Unfortunately, many of us have been taught—either consciously or unconsciously—that our stories and our experiences don’t matter. Perhaps if we simply “buck up,” our problems will magically resolve. Or possibly we just need to forget what happened and “let it go.”

That is the approach Erica, a mother of two and part-time account manager in a marketing firm, tried to take. She is smart, capable, and kind. She appears to have it all

together, so people are always asking for her help. In turn, she attempts to offer more than she has to give. Growing up, Erica learned that she didn't have much of a choice. The message she received from demanding parents was that no matter how bad she felt on the inside, it was essential to uphold the image of a successful family. This cemented her belief that she had to appear okay even if she wasn't. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Erica constantly battled shame, feeling that she was just too sensitive and too much because she couldn't keep her emotions from bubbling up.

Now as an adult, Erica finds herself constantly ignoring signs of hunger, stress, sadness, or the terrible pain in her neck and back—pushing down discomfort because she's promised herself she won't be too much anymore. At the office, she's productive, but she feels as if she is always one moment away from breaking. What if she forgets to reply to that important email? What if her work doesn't meet expectations? What if . . . ?

Erica runs on constant anxiety and adrenaline at work, and when she comes home, she is fried and emotionally overwhelmed. She is often trying new techniques to help her better manage her life, but they never stick. When she takes a rare moment to reflect at the end of the day, she recognizes that she's her own worst critic—which probably isn't healthy—but who has the time or energy to be kind to themselves?

Like the ever-elusive quick fix, ignoring, pretending, or numbing something doesn't usually resolve our pain. Instead, 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. From a psychological and physiological perspective, the more disconnected we are from our lived experience, the more overwhelmed or numb to our lives we'll be. Research has shown us, in fact, that having cohesive stories matters for our emotional wellness.⁴

As a trauma-informed therapist, I don't consider stories to simply be abstract concepts or ethereal ideas, but instead the neurobiological framework through which we experience life—for better or worse. Simply put, stories—or the compilation of events, emotions, sensations, ideas, and relationships we've experienced—are held in our minds and bodies, and they affect how we see our world. The templates 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 experiences to believe that we are not enough or that we're shameful, unlovable, or any number of other untruths.

The stories we weave and the meaning we make from them create templates for how we understand God, life, others, and ourselves. Regardless of the frameworks we carry, choosing to care for and nurture the whole history of who we are is connected to the way we were made to thrive.

What does it look like if we're disconnected from our stories—and why would we want to disconnect in the first

place? Typically, it's because some parts of them feel disturbing, or at least uncomfortable. As a result, we may want to minimize or numb the pain we've been through, the significance of our wounds, or the intensity of our discomfort. In my own life, I often attempt to distance myself from pain in the way I speak about it, apologizing to people for my feelings or for being a "burden." It's only when I acknowledge that my experience is valid that I have the ability to do something with my discomfort.

When we deny the reality of our experiences, we don't become more of who God designed us to be, but less. There's no way to have cohesive stories unless we truly embrace all of it: the good, the hard, the bittersweet, the sad, the joyful, the lonely, and the painful. It all counts.

If we know something else to be true, it's this: God is a curator and keeper of stories. Psalm 56:8 says, "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book" (NLT). God is invested in the entire arc of our humanity. He made us this way, and it's no accident that our physiology connects with his design. Learning how to be "with" our stories—in our bodies, without becoming overwhelmed by or numbing our past experiences—is the way we will learn how to actually handle and move through the grief and anxiety that come up. It's also the way we will learn to write new endings that are true to ourselves.

I've watched this transformation take place in many people's lives as they've become compassionate witnesses to the pain

they've experienced or the parts of themselves that have felt too much. As they came to terms with their life stories, each person learned to try softer in a slightly different way:

- Gretchen began to acknowledge the grief she felt over parents who were critical and inconsistent in her childhood. Instead of shaming herself over wounds that still hurt, she learned to speak kindly to herself when she felt stuck.
- Pete began paying mindful attention to the tension he felt even when he was away from the office, which kept him from engaging with his family when he was home. By setting boundaries around his work and email life, he was able to be truly present with his family.
- Gina learned to pay compassionate attention to herself so she could recognize when she was pushing herself far beyond her capacity in an effort to make other people happy. Now she's learning how to be okay with other people's disappointment. She also spends more time with people who honor her limits.
- For Tim, trying softer meant getting curious about his disconnection from just about every emotion—except anger—and then letting himself see what might be behind this shutdown of most of his feelings.
- Monique began taking time to notice her body's cues around pain and hunger. No longer does she try to push through the whole day starving and tired, but instead

TRY SOFTER

she paces her life differently so she can feed and care for herself. She also takes short breaks simply to notice what she actually feels.

- Elaina learned to reach out to friends and family when she felt exhausted and alone rather than trying to act as if she were always okay.

Although trying softer looks a bit different for each of them, they are all listening to themselves in new ways. In fact, paying compassionate attention to themselves is what tells them how to move forward.

SLOW DOWN

Reader, it's incredibly normal to want to be finished with growth and healing. I get it. I remember when I first started meeting with a counselor back when I was in graduate school. Bless my heart, I went in ready to white-knuckle my way through all the pain. "Let's just get it over with" was my mantra. I figured there had to be a quick way to achieve the perceived perfection that would finally help me feel calm and at peace. In a sense, this desire to rush the process was the opposite of honoring my story. I wanted to hurry past it because it was extremely painful in parts. The reality is, it has taken years of trauma therapy to be fully present with elements of my life that caused deep wounds. I tell you this because my experience is actually quite normal. None of us are exempt—but some cuts may be deeper than others.

So what does owning all of your story look like? For Erica, learning to tell her story means she has to honestly acknowledge where she is avoiding or minimizing pain. It also means that when something feels too overwhelming for her to consider in a particular moment, she or her therapist takes a break from exploring that part further until she feels ready to address it more fully. Over time, Erica can develop the ability to embrace all parts of her story.

Just as there's no way to rush a flower to bloom, we cannot go beyond the stage we are in—we have to move at the pace that feels doable to us. This is why I invite you to respect the intensity of your experience and to remember that the in-between is sacred too. If I've learned anything, it may be that the *way* we do something matters as much as *what* we do. The process of blooming is as valuable as the flower it produces.

If you're like me or Erica, parts of your story may bring up pain—there's no shame in that. It's simply a sign that it may be good to pause or slow your pace when you delve into difficult pieces. Sometimes I tell my clients, “Let's dance

White-Knuckling 101

We “white-knuckle” when we consciously or unconsciously ignore internal warning signs from our minds and bodies to cope with situations that are overwhelming or disturbing. Often we learn to overfunction not out of choice but as a way to survive. This approach then carries over into everyday life because we don't know a different way.

We white-knuckle when we . . .

- ignore signs of pain, hunger, or exhaustion;
- minimize our emotions (*Oh, it's not that bad*);
- find ourselves overwhelmed by big emotions that we've ignored too long;
- numb our emotions (Netflix binge, anyone?);
- say yes when we mean no;
- bounce between feeling motivated by and then overwhelmed by adrenaline; or
- go through seasons of profound exhaustion, depression, or numbness because we've been overfunctioning.

with your story.” I mean that they may step into their stories and find them tolerable for a moment, but if they notice themselves becoming overwhelmed, it’s absolutely appropriate to take a metaphorical or physical step back. That’s process. How might you do this? First, give yourself permission to fully shift out of your story for a bit. For example, pop a mint in your mouth and notice the flavors or the tingling on your tongue. Turn on your favorite song and sing along at the top of your lungs. Or arrange to meet a friend or two for coffee and let yourself receive their warmth.

The truth is that for many of us, embracing our stories is the work of a lifetime. This idea of honoring our lived history is more about an internal posture that keeps us open and curious to the nuances than it is about completing a task.

The great thing is, you don’t have to be done embracing your story to come along with me on this journey of trying softer. If I were sitting across from you, I would tell you, “I do not want you to white-knuckle through your story; that’s not what we’re here for. Instead, think of our work in a circular way: We’ll begin here, we’ll move forward, and sometimes we’ll come back to a place of examining our stories—not because we’ll be stuck, but because this is all part of the process of healing.”

The goal of trying softer isn’t to bring about a quick fix, but to empower us with the freedom to live in the here and now while still honoring and tending to the wounds of our stories that have kept us disconnected from our experiences.

TRY SOFTER

As we prepare to embark on this journey, I invite you to consider a few questions that will give you a starting point for embracing your story. Remember that some parts may feel especially difficult to spend time with; for now, feel free to simply note them.

1. On a piece of paper, create a timeline of your life. Write down the major events first and then the more ordinary ones. What events stand out to you most? Spend as much or as little time on this exercise as you feel comfortable with. You may decide to use different colors to highlight different types of events, such as pink for transitions, green for losses, blue for accomplishments, red for experiences that felt overwhelming, etc.
2. Spend time considering your story as you feel able. In what ways have you tried to minimize or divorce yourself from your story? Are there any events you don't feel you have the ability to spend much time with? Are there any areas you are tempted to minimize that leave you with a visceral feeling of yuck? Perhaps mark these with an asterisk or write a note beside them on your timeline.
3. Where in your story do you desire to see change or healing but feel unable to move forward?
4. Where in your story do you feel proud of yourself for what you've made it through or how you've adapted to change?
5. When you feel ready, show your timeline to someone with whom you feel emotionally safe (friend, spouse, therapist, pastor, etc.).

WHEN WE CAN LOVINGLY
TURN TOWARD OUR PAIN,
EXPRESSED IN VARIOUS
WAYS BY OUR BODIES,
WE OFTEN BEGIN TO FIND
WE HAVE CHOICES WE
COULDN'T SEE BEFORE.