

DR. ELIZABETH STEVENS

with THOMAS JEFFRIES



unshackled

Finding God's Freedom from Trauma

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FOCUS
ON
THE FAMILY®

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Unshackled: Finding God's Freedom from Trauma

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introduction

The first thing I recall after regaining consciousness was total blindness, followed immediately by searing pain. My head was aching and my jaw was throbbing, clenched so tightly that I thought my teeth had been knocked out.

It was the summer of 2015, and I'd been descending from atop Longs Peak in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. The weather was beautiful that day, and a friend and I had reached the summit by sunrise. We were on our way back down the mountain, crossing a sloping field of boulders, when I stumbled and fell.

My friend was ahead of me and didn't witness my fall, but I can remember that both my hands were caught tightly in the straps of my hiking poles, and I was unable to catch myself before I fell headfirst into a large rock below me.

Everything went white. My mind flashed back to my one previous life-threatening experience: As a child, I had slipped underwater in a swimming pool. I knew I couldn't breathe and that I was about to drown, until someone noticed me struggling and pulled me back to the surface.

On that mountainside field of boulders, I felt like that drowning child again. *I can't breathe*. My life seemed to be fading away.

As I gradually came to, I touched my face and realized that my eyes were covered with blood. I started to wipe it off, discovering that I wasn't blind after all. Blood was flowing out of a head wound above my left eye. I was in shock, dizzy, and nauseated, but I managed to convert my buff—a head covering favored by mountain climbers—into a bandage.

A park ranger quickly arrived on the scene and told me I needed to get down the mountain as soon as possible. He said that the nearest rescue team was busy assisting with a car accident, so my friend and I would need to descend on our own.

My neck was unsteady, and I had likely experienced whiplash, but I was able to make it back to the car without falling again. As we'd encountered groups of hikers on their way up the mountain, I'd been surprised at the looks of stark horror I'd seen in their eyes. When I saw my reflection in the car, I suddenly understood the reason for them. I looked like a warrior out of the movie *Braveheart*, my face crimson with blood and a makeshift bandage wrapped around my head. My friend drove me to the emergency room in a nearby

town, where they cleaned my wound and stitched me up. They also took a CT scan that apparently showed no immediate concerns. Then they sent me home.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI). It wasn't the first time I'd experienced serious trauma. Unfortunately, it also wouldn't be the last.

At the time, I had no understanding of the journey that lay ahead of me, the time I'd spend struggling to regain some sense of normalcy. My body no longer had the same capabilities as before, and my mind wasn't much better. The person I had been before the injury seemed to have vanished.

Reflecting on this experience years later, even as I still mourned for the person who'd been lost, I began to realize what I've gained along the way. I started to recognize how God has used this journey to soften my heart and help me more fully experience emotions I once pushed aside. He's used the trauma that tore my soul to bring healing in areas of my life that I'd never even realized were broken.



When most people hear the word *trauma*, they often picture serious, life-threatening situations—a military ambush, a school shooting, someone being trapped in a burning building. Others might think of victims of violent crime, abuse, or sexual assault. We might even remember those whose job it is to step in and help—the medical workers, the soldiers, the first responders, the people whose next shift on duty could bring them face to face with a deadly car crash, a natural disaster, or cardiac arrest.

But much trauma is unnoticed. Trauma can occur whenever someone is overwhelmed, like when they narrowly avoid a head-on collision, face a serious illness, or experience ongoing harassment or bullying. Repressed childhood trauma can rear its head years later when an individual faces certain triggering events. Constant threats of danger or harm are enough to trigger traumatic responses. (The fear of domestic violence, for example, can sneak up on a person in their own home.)

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), the American Psychiatric Association's pre-eminent manual on mental disorders, says that individuals can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) merely from being exposed to someone *else's* trauma, like witnessing a traumatic event or learning that a close friend or loved one has faced one.¹

As we consider the wider landscape of trauma, we begin to recognize that it may lurk all around us. It's a frightening thought, to be sure, but having this larger view of the nature of trauma allows us to better recognize and navigate its effects in our own lives.

The experience of trauma can cause feelings of loss, hopelessness, and helplessness. It can also affect how we see God and ourselves. When we clearly identify the trauma in our lives and how it affects us, we can better address the resulting dysfunctional thought patterns and behaviors that lead to harmful barriers in our relationships, faith, careers, and more.



I never intended to spend my professional career working with trauma patients. This wasn't even on my radar during my time in medical school. I studied medicine because I wanted to help hurting people get better, to get to the root causes of their health problems.

I joined the United States Air Force because I come from a military family. I know the people. I know the culture. And I wanted to help men and women who serve our country. As I progressed through my clinical rotations, I discovered just how little time most physicians are able to spend with their patients. I realized that my goal of getting to know patients on a deep level—and helping to find the root causes of their health problems—was not meant to be.

But my initial disappointment turned to relief during my final rotation in medical school. Psychiatry, I discovered, was where I needed to be. In this work, I could spend significant time with my patients. I could listen to their stories, and as they faced their pain, I could help free them from their inner turmoil. I sensed that God had created me for this purpose. I felt truly inspired for the first time during my years in medical school.

I continued my psychiatry training in the Air Force, and my sense of calling toward this profession only increased. In the Air Force, I encountered patients dealing with trauma and PTSD. I evaluated service members flown in from combat zones and wounded soldiers in burn centers—men and

women, often just returning from deployment, who'd experienced some truly horrible situations.

I worked at military facilities, with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), at university hospitals, in detention centers, and in children's clinics. I treated patients dealing with bipolar disorders, psychosis, depression, anxiety, delirium, substance abuse, eating disorders, and more. I learned how to rule out medical problems that masquerade as psychiatric symptoms. And, thanks to a fellowship I received through the Air Force, I spent a year away from military duties training to be a child and adolescent psychiatrist. That fellowship was a great opportunity to help not just individuals but entire families.

The fellowship brought me to Colorado, and the mountains of Colorado are what brought me to my knees. When I fell headfirst into a boulder on that sunny morning on Longs Peak, my career focus shifted again. I sustained a traumatic brain injury, but I started to realize that the training I'd received and the tools I'd gained were not enough to restore my own health.

It was puzzling: I had learned a lot about trauma via my education and my practice, but now I was experiencing it for myself. And I didn't have any answers.



This book is about how I found healing after traumatic events—and how I've helped others find healing from theirs. I have journeyed alongside patients plagued with severe

anxiety and psychosis, watching as they've progressed from a state of barely being able to leave their homes to a state of being employed and even helping others on their journeys. I've witnessed how resilient people can be.

This book is for anyone who's experienced trauma, whether physical or emotional. Military members, civilians, first responders. Parents and children. People who simply want to be better community leaders, coworkers, and friends. Perhaps you're reading this book because you've had a personal encounter with trauma, either recently or in the distant past. Or maybe you have a close friend or loved one who's struggling with the ongoing effects of a traumatic experience. Whatever your exposure to trauma, I trust that this book has something for you.

Experience has taught me that everyone has his or her own path to wholeness. In my work, I emphasize strategies for dealing with life's stressors and the importance of self-care, but there is no set protocol that works for everyone. Recovering from trauma requires patience, flexibility, and consistency.

Through my journey, I've learned that God can transform a heart traumatized by fear into one full of compassion. My goal in this book is to guide readers out of isolation and onto a path of healing, wholeness, and resilience.

This book is also for those who don't yet realize they are suffering. You might have received a copy from someone who cares about you. If that describes you, you'll need to start with the recognition that denial is a powerful defense mechanism

and one of the most effective tactics of our enemy, the devil. When we deny the truth about our past trauma, we keep it buried deep, where it will continue to fester. The longer we ignore it, the more it will continue to impact our lives. How can we heal from a situation if we refuse to acknowledge its existence?

Are you experiencing restlessness, anger, resentment, or defensiveness? Is it sometimes difficult to be alone with your own thoughts? You may fall into the category of denial, never having viewed your experiences as particularly traumatic. You may dismiss even the possibility that they've affected you in a significant way. That's actually quite understandable: The last thing most folks want to do after enduring a terrible experience or loss of control is to revisit it. But honest recognition is a necessary first step toward healing.



This book will help you deal with the traumatic experiences that have stolen your sense of freedom, fostered bitterness and anger, or created fertile soil for addiction. We'll examine the stories of several of my patients to see how they've been able to overcome their traumas through spiritual and group support, various therapies and medications, and a recognition of lifelong barriers. The names of these patients, along with some specific details, have been changed to protect their privacy. By sharing these stories with you, I hope to provide comfort and encouragement through the process of looking at those who have overcome similar levels of hardship and adversity.

You'll read about Rachel, a military veteran who came to me looking for help with her PTSD. She was having trouble in her relationships and struggling with underlying anger on a daily basis. She had traumatic flashbacks, irritability, and serious anxiety. As we discussed her personal history, I learned that she had suffered years of sexual abuse growing up—a situation that had prompted her to join the military in order to escape. What's more, her family members had abused drugs for as long as she could remember, to the point that it had almost been considered a badge of honor in their home.

You'll meet Chris, a seasoned firefighter whom I met through a support group for first responders and veterans. He has seen some of the worst tragedies possible trying to rescue people trapped in burning buildings, including babies who didn't end up making it out alive. He's tried to resuscitate many fire victims, and he hasn't always been successful. He often used to blame himself for those who did not survive, and he came to the point where the burden was a pressure he could no longer bear.

You'll learn about Jill, a woman who had spent her entire life trapped in a cycle of guilt and shame. Her childhood had left her convinced that she was worthless. Her father had sexually abused her and her sister growing up, and their mother had never acknowledged the abuse or done anything to stop it. Jill coped by trying to block the memories, at least until she began to experience PTSD symptoms after the birth of her first child. She was hypervigilant and overcome with

fear. She couldn't trust any man to treat her with respect, to treat her as anything other than a sexual object. She thought her husband was always looking at other women. She was plagued by fears of her husband betraying her, even though there was no evidence to support these thoughts.

I'll also share my own journey. After my TBI, I visited every specialist in the book. I tried every therapy or medication I thought might help. Each new treatment was supposed to be the one that would finally give me hope, but none of them worked. The more positive I felt about a treatment, the more I crashed into despair when it failed. It got to the point where my doctors started asking what *I* thought I needed. So many experts, so little information! And so little help.

I tried to rely on God. I listened to the whole Bible and poured out my heart in prayer. I told God that it didn't matter if I recovered, as long as I had a close relationship with Him. I wanted to believe that, but each day was a new struggle. I easily slipped into impatience and frustration. I couldn't take my mind off my misery, or my inability to work, or my headaches.

I could not ignore my deep longing to be *well*.

Each day I would wake up hoping that this was finally the day when I could read a book or catch up on my email again. But every day became the same nightmare of boredom, hopelessness, and helplessness.

What was I supposed to do?

Was there anything I could do?

CHAPTER ONE

denial

The days, weeks, and months that followed my traumatic brain injury were a haze of sleep, recurring nausea, involuntary inactivity—and then more trauma. Everything changed as a result of my injury, especially my identity and my sense of self-worth. In an instant, I was transformed from a high-achieving United States Air Force major and psychiatrist into someone who could no longer read or control my own emotions—or, in essence, my own life.

My mother flew to Colorado right away to help care for me. We soon made another trip to the emergency room because I couldn't stop throwing up and certainly couldn't keep any food down. The doctors there sent me to my military base, where I could consult with my primary care physician. My doctor prescribed "brain rest," which meant no

reading, no electronics, and no strenuous activity of any kind, mental or physical. I was told that I had no choice in the matter.

The instructions were easy to follow, at least at first. I spent most of the next month sleeping. Even having a simple conversation was very disconcerting—I couldn't find the words I wanted, and my memory was shot. I slurred my speech and couldn't retain information I'd just heard.

The military physician prescribed TBI rehabilitation, during which I would receive speech therapy as well as physical and occupational therapy. However, my queasiness, low energy, and inability to retain information made progress almost impossible. I could barely tolerate the car ride to my appointments. By the time I made it to the treatment center, I'd already be wracked with nausea.

I was also pretty oblivious to what was going on around me. In those first few weeks, I displayed a carefree, laid-back mentality I had never exhibited before. "What happened to my daughter?" my mother asked. It turned out that her daughter was in denial. At the time, I was still assuming that I would be back to work and to normalcy in no time.

My mother and I got a revealing glimpse into my current state when a speech therapist read me a story to help assess any cognitive deficits I might have. It was a brief story, just a few sentences, about a boy who threw three rocks into a lake. As soon as she finished reading, she asked me how many rocks the boy threw. I racked my brain as hard as I could, but . . . nothing. I could not recall the number. My mom

said that that was the moment she realized my recovery was going to be a long haul.

So much for all my postgraduate schooling. The last day I was in therapy, the TBI rehab program coordinator had a talk with my mother and me. She said I might have to consider the possibility that the Air Force would retire me. I didn't want to entertain that possibility, and I told my mom there was no way it would happen. I was completely unable to grasp the gravity of my situation. I remained convinced that I would bounce back.

In addition to my rehabilitation program, I still needed surgery to repair my broken nose. The plastic surgeon was unable to complete the repairs due to unexpectedly finding a large hole in my septum. (When it rains, it pours!)

When I awoke from the anesthesia, the surgeon told me that I'd need to schedule another surgery because he hadn't been prepared for the additional damage he had encountered. I was (obviously) not looking forward to another operation, especially since I had reacted to my first surgery with a sleepless night of intense nausea and vomiting because I'd had a reaction to the anesthesia. To top it off, the rehab center told me that I couldn't tolerate any more therapy at that time and that it would be best if I didn't come back until after the second surgery.

So, another setback. Another month of waiting. Nothing to do except rest.

I couldn't watch television or even look at my phone because it might trigger more extreme nausea. I went from

climbing mountains to walking at an extremely slow pace, and even then only for short distances. Carrying on a conversation for longer than ten minutes left me exhausted, and when I got tired, my speech slurred. My appetite decreased, and I was losing both weight and strength. My good attitude was just about the only thing I had going for me, but that's probably because I was still in denial about my recovery. I simply couldn't process the seriousness of my situation. Besides, what could I really do? Not only was I being ordered to rest, but my body would give out on me if I didn't. I trusted that God would take care of me, and I remained hopeful that all this was temporary.



Denial hinders healing. When people refuse to accept the reality of a situation, it prevents them from taking the necessary steps to deal with their trauma. Denial is the first stop on legendary psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's well-known model of the five stages of grief. (The other four stages are anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.)

There are, however, certain circumstances in which denial can serve a helpful purpose. Sometimes it can give us a little time to process an extremely distressing event without going into a tailspin. In my case, it likely helped me in the initial healing process by insulating me from extreme anxiety and worry over the potential long-term repercussions of my TBI. It gave my body the chance to begin healing without excess stress hormones or difficulty relaxing. It was as if my mind and body were in a forced state of rest.

But while denial may be helpful for a short time, it can impede the recovery process if it lingers too long. It becomes toxic when it prevents people from making progress, leaving emotions unprocessed and keeping sufferers from seeking the help they need. I began to realize that this sort of toxic denial was what I was experiencing.

I've listened to law enforcement officers and other first responders share stories about all the horrific things they've witnessed and follow them up with the almost stubborn assertion that none of it ever really affected them. I've had military patients who have endured the horrors of combat tell me that the experience never bothered them.

Wait . . . what?

How can you witness horrific evil or suffering and remain unaffected? It's important to note that a good number of those patients have failed marriages and few close friendships, if any. Many also admit that they haven't experienced significant peace or joy for years.

It never really bothered me.

I would argue that these people have developed innate protective mechanisms that help them keep and maintain emotional distance from the terrible things they've seen. But these mechanisms have negatively affected their personal lives. Perhaps the most common one is denial. They may not necessarily be denying that trauma occurred but rather that they have been or continue to be influenced by it in any detrimental way.

To be clear, the detrimental influence of trauma isn't always manifested as PTSD. It could be manifested as a simple change

in thought patterns or behavior. For example, a seasoned paramedic might not recognize the symptoms or significant effects of trauma upon learning that his wife and daughter have been involved in a car accident, but years later he might recognize the impact the event has had on him when called to the scene of a car wreck with another woman or child involved.

When our bodies' systems are overwhelmed, we are forced to make a choice—especially if a traumatic experience is personal and cuts to our core. We can choose to process the trauma with God and those we trust, or we can choose to ignore it and move on. It's like having a stallion stampeding through your soul: You can try to harness the trauma in search of deep healing, or you can let it run wild and wreak havoc.

Here's another way to put it: If you do nothing and continue on in denial, the enemy can use your trauma to unleash reckless, destructive power in your life. But if you call on God's mercy and power, He can redirect what the enemy intends for evil to bring about transformation, character refinement, and healing.



Trauma and its resulting effects can be so overwhelming and painful that we'll do everything possible to minimize the helplessness and powerlessness we feel. Sometimes this involves altering our memories, suppressing past events as if they never happened, or avoiding the places, thoughts, or feelings that remind us of our trauma. We create distractions and comforts to ease our pain and suffering. We try to evade

the cruelty we see around us or even the cruelty we see in ourselves. We try to pretend the pain isn't there. These are the strategies of those who are in denial.

Heuristics, or mental shortcuts, are methods people use to make a quick decision when there's little time to consider all the available information. An educated guess is one example of a heuristic. When we try to make sense of trauma in the moment, our brains try to take these little shortcuts in an effort to fill in the gaps. The problem is that this process often leads to faulty reasoning in the future. Heuristics sometimes lead people to make decisions based on strong associated emotions, like when a child fears all dogs because she was once bitten by one. Her brain takes a shortcut to her fear through the neighborhood of that one experience.

One of my patients, Laura, was a case of heuristics gone wrong. Laura was molested by a religious leader when she was a child. For sixty years, she kept that trauma to herself, never dealing with it or considering how it might continue to affect her many years later. (In fact, I was the first person she ever told about the abuse.) One outcome was that she harbored a lifelong prejudice against all clergy members. She refused to believe in God. This unresolved trauma shaped the way she viewed believers in Christ for the rest of her life.

While heuristics can help us make snap decisions in the heat of the moment, they can also introduce errors in thinking, leading to inaccurate thought patterns throughout life. A shortcut doesn't always get us to the right place.

In Laura's case, she associated religious people with harm, applying her fear of one individual to every person of religious authority, including God. Clearly there were other factors and emotions involved, but Laura's manner of condensing her experience reflects a common pattern with trauma.

When denial is strong, faulty thought patterns are rarely addressed or even acknowledged—a situation that can persist for years or even decades.

I've treated several patients who experienced significant childhood traumas but didn't start exhibiting severe PTSD symptoms until their children left the home. The power of denial helped them manage long enough to raise their children, but it also preserved their wounds to the extent that the PTSD had become quite severe by the time they began processing their pasts. I've also counseled Vietnam veterans who maintained successful careers after the war only to develop severe PTSD once they retired.

Denial cannot be sustained indefinitely, and maintaining it takes a lot of energy. This is why many trauma sufferers seek constant distraction. It's why they are uncomfortable with quiet, with being alone with their thoughts.

When we're in denial, we remain vulnerable. The enemy knows how trauma affects us. He knows our vulnerabilities and the comforts we seek in order to distract ourselves from our distress and suffering. His goal is to keep us away from God and draw us to anything other than Him to find peace. The enemy wants us to remain isolated, our pain locked

away. That way he can continue feeding us accusations, distorted thinking, and distrust.

But when we invite God to shine His light on our wounds, traumas, and hurts, the enemy has to leave. This is why confession and Christian community are so important. The enemy simply can't stay in that environment.

Denial keeps us from acknowledging our trauma to others, which prevents us from receiving their support and, eventually, our healing. The enemy wants us to remain trapped in denial, enslaved by its effects. The protective mechanisms we put in place, including denial, are not sustainable. They end up stealing our freedom and shrinking our worlds. This is the destructive nature of denial.



If you are in denial about your trauma, you might not recognize that you're in denial. Here are some signs that this might be what you're dealing with:

- * You get angry, sad, irritable, or short-tempered for no apparent reason.
- * You stay isolated and allow few people, if any, into your immediate circle.
- * You struggle with relationships—though you don't know why—and have difficulty connecting with others.
- * You become defensive at the drop of a hat.
- * Your loved ones beg you to seek help, but you don't think you have a problem.

Once you've recognized denial of trauma, it's time to start dealing with it:

- * Try to develop better self-awareness. One exercise that I've found to be very effective is to ask a few people whom you trust and who know you well to list three positive qualities about you and three areas where you need improvement. Take notes, and look for a pattern among these observations. Have your friends noticed something about you that you haven't been able to admit to yourself before?

In his classic book *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis imagines two demons in conversation about how to best distract a new believer in Christ. Screwtape, the more experienced of the two, illustrates the power of self-deception: "You must bring [the new Christian] to a condition in which he can practise self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office."¹ Lewis recognized that those who are close to us can often easily pick up on characteristics or qualities that might take us months of therapy to uncover ourselves. This is why it's vital to be part of a safe and authentic community.

- * Try to identify situations where people or things trigger, anger, or infuriate you. A *trigger* is something that sets off a fight-or-flight reaction, brings on PTSD symptoms, or produces excessive stress.

Sometimes such responses can arise from righteous anger regarding injustice, but they can also arise from sins within ourselves that we also see in others. People around us are often like mirrors, reflecting back both our goodness and our flaws. We can tend to react negatively toward people we see doing the same things that we struggle with.

- * Reflect on any discomfort or restlessness you experience around certain people. If you identify any, talk with someone you trust about the situation or make an appointment with a counselor or therapist. Through these interactions, seek God's wisdom in helping you discern why you react the way you do.

We often miss the correlation between others' behavior and our own. If that is a pervasive pattern in your life, there's a good chance that something hidden is waiting to be uncovered. We must look to Jesus' wisdom in Matthew 7:3-5: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

- * Consider working with a professional counselor or therapist. It's important to remember that close relationships tend to stir up the most struggles. Those closest to

us are the ones who know us best; we tend to let down our guard more around loved ones than we do around coworkers or the general public. We also usually trust a spouse or close friend more than other people. Trauma, however, can make us less willing to trust those close to us. It can make us prone to defend ourselves from future hurt and resistant to exposing our vulnerabilities. This leads to a defensive mindset that makes it difficult to empathize with or even hear what other people are saying to us.

This is where a neutral observer like a professional counselor or therapist can help. And if you seek out marriage, family, or group counseling, the counselor can also guide difficult conversations and help each person effectively communicate what they might otherwise avoid processing. When emotions remain under control, the counselor can ensure that both parties listen appropriately and help tease out any underlying trauma that's been leading to conflict.



I spent the first few weeks after my mountain accident in denial about the severity of my TBI, and it was in the midst of that season of weakness that I suffered an even worse trauma. This second experience wounded not only my body but also my heart and soul. I went from temporary denial, which was actually helping me heal, to ongoing, toxic denial that left me in a loneliness I had never experienced before.

First, a little background. Many girls dream of a prince who will sweep her off her feet, provide for her, pursue her, and protect her with everything he has. That was definitely the case with me. I was waiting for a man who would respect me, honor me, and value my purity above his desires—a man who pursued God and never gave up. Even as I devoted years to my medical training and Air Force career, I still dreamed of finding a life partner and soul mate. But I never found anyone who met my criteria. I also never took the time to pursue anyone myself. After all, the man should pursue the woman . . . right?

Throughout my schooling and medical residency, I found life outside of work to be very lonely. Most of my friends were married and had kids, and it was hard to find people to hang out with outside of work. Once I moved to Colorado, I had more free time and finally decided to explore online dating. I normally gravitate toward people who enjoy the outdoors, so I connected with someone who loved the mountains as much as I did. He started pursuing me, and it felt good to be desired and have an adventure partner. In fact, it felt so good that I began ignoring the red flags in our relationship.

I was trying to fill the void of my loneliness, so my desire to be pursued, wanted, and appreciated overwhelmed my desire to wait for a spiritual leader, for someone who served God. I just didn't want to be alone anymore. When this man told me that waiting until marriage for sex was a deal breaker for him, I simply ignored it. I truly believed that I could

change him into an amazing Christian—the kind of man I'd always wanted to marry.

Clearly, I had my motives in our relationship, but he had one too. He kept pressuring me, and one night he got what he wanted. It was my thirtieth birthday, and we had just completed one of the most difficult hikes in Colorado. We celebrated with a couple of glasses of wine. I was absolutely exhausted, and that night, his will won out. He took what was meant for my husband.

I felt like I had died inside, as if everything good in me was gone. I felt worthless, thinking that the only way I could redeem the situation was to make this man my husband. I teetered between not caring what happened and trying to do whatever it took to make him love me and marry me and pursue God. But the more I tried to make it work, the more I started drifting away from my own faith.

The relationship became toxic. It was a classic power struggle: the woman's desire to change a man versus the man's desire not to be controlled. I didn't realize how much this relationship was about finding my worth instead of finding a godly partner.

It wasn't until years later that I realized just how much of my identity I had once associated with my sexual purity. Indeed, for many years I had lived with a legalistic mentality: As long as the outside of the cup (my moral behavior) was impeccable, it didn't matter that on the inside I felt dirty and ashamed (see Matthew 23:25-26).

A spiritual barrier like this sort of self-righteousness can

impact every aspect of life, preventing true healing from trauma. In my case, it led to a long series of poor choices that caused me to drift away from my true identity as a child of God. The cleansing power of Christ's sacrifice had already made me without blemish in God's eyes, but my quest to be lovable and worthy of a man led me to a dead end of darkness and pain.

In that dead end, however, I found something beautiful, something that I'd never realized I'd been missing. I found the true lover of my soul—a heavenly Father with open arms welcoming me into His embrace. I began to learn the difference between chasing after an imperfect mate and inviting Jesus to satisfy my deepest longings. While I'd been pressuring and cajoling my boyfriend to meet my needs, Jesus had always been there, offering Himself to me completely and without hesitation.



After my accident, I was in denial about certain aspects of my trauma, like recognizing how long the recovery from the TBI might take. But I was not in denial about my debilitating condition. I knew it was getting worse and that I needed to seek God's peace more than ever before, because the ultimate healing comes only from Him. I figured that the best first step to ensuring I could find peace and healing was to prioritize my relationship with Him. I still couldn't read, so I listened to my Bible app as much as possible. I wanted to draw closer to God and get my strength from His Word.

At the same time, I felt convicted about my relationship

with my boyfriend. I told him that I needed to follow God's plan, which meant that I could no longer engage in sex outside of marriage. I knew that this decision could spell the end of our relationship, but I simply had to put God first. While my boyfriend wasn't happy about my decision, he said that he would continue to stick with me, even after my traumatic brain injury on the mountain.

For several weeks, I resisted his pressure, but one night it became a physical struggle that I couldn't prevent. I don't remember the exact circumstances before it happened. (This is pretty common for someone experiencing post-traumatic stress.) What I do remember is that my boyfriend pulled me off my mattress and pushed me against the side of the bed. I tried to escape his grip, but I had little strength to fight back so soon after my injury. All I could do was cry and try to remain still until the attack was over. I never knew I could feel so humiliated, dehumanized, and powerless all at the same time.

I would never be the same, but the next day it somehow seemed as if nothing had happened. I can only conclude that my subconscious mind was in another kind of denial, doing everything possible to simply protect my sanity. I just couldn't handle the thought that someone I'd loved and trusted—someone I'd allowed in—could have violated me when I was at my weakest. Sadly, I blamed myself for what had happened. *It must have happened because I let him into my life*, I thought.

My demeanor quickly changed, and I began suffering

from insomnia, intense migraines, and mood swings. I was frequently angry and irritable. But I failed to connect the sexual assault to any of these symptoms because I wouldn't even let myself remember that it had happened.

This new denial was even greater than the first! It created a wound in my soul that only God could heal. It created feelings of distrust of everyone around me. I even doubted myself. *How did I not see this coming? How can I trust anyone not to hurt me? How can I trust that God will protect me?*

Taken together, my distrust, isolation, shame, and hidden trauma were fertile ground for a brutal case of PTSD—and this was all in addition to my traumatic brain injury and the resulting issues with memory and processing. I had no idea what I was in for. This new, deeper denial was creating a number of barriers that would entrench my trauma even further.

In the space of several weeks, I had now suffered two traumatic events. The first one had been bad enough, and I'd just started to recognize what it was doing to me. But I had no clue about the damage this second one would bring, nor could I imagine the long, dark journey that lay ahead of me.

REFLECTION

1. How have you dealt with traumatic events or significant stress in your life?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel the need to defend yourself?

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3. When you spend time alone and become lost in your thoughts, what do you think about?
4. Is it difficult to be by yourself without distractions?
Are there certain situations or conversations that you find yourself avoiding?

CHALLENGE

Identify three people in your life whom you trust, preferably those who know you best. Ask them to list three strengths about you as well as three areas in your life that need improvement. Do you see a pattern in these observations that you haven't ever admitted to yourself?