



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Fall 2021

Healing Involves Acceptance, Courage, Work, and Commitment

By Michael J. Bland, Psy.D., D. Min., L.C.P.C.

PART I

Answer when I call, my saving God. In my troubles, you cleared a way; show me favor; hear my prayer. How long will you people mock my honor, love what is worthless, chase after lies? Know that the Lord works wonders for the faithful; the Lord hears when I call out. Offer fitting sacrifice and trust in the Lord. Many say, "May we see better times! Lord, show us the light of your face!" But you have given my heart more joy than they have when grain and wine abound. In peace I shall both lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me secure. —Psalm 4:2-4; 5-9



All adults carry feelings that are rooted in their childhood developmental experiences. Some childhood experiences are filled with happy memories while others bring anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, or shame. These feelings can be triggered by circumstances that are somehow reminiscent of the initial experience or trauma. Such an emotional trigger or memory may bring various feelings to the surface “as if” the current experience or relationship is the same as a previous experience or relationship. While this as if experience may not be real, it feels real to the one experiencing it, and may trigger various feelings including, but not limited to, anxiety, sadness, or grief. Learning to normalize the intensity of these feelings is an important part of anyone’s healing process from a trauma or loss.

It can be important to realize that healing is a process not an event. Healing is not a simple check list of things that are needed to be accomplished and the end of which one can say “I am done” or “I am healed.” It is a process that takes time; a process that needs to be integrated into one's life, and it may take a lifetime. Healing is a process that involves emotional, spiritual, interpersonal elements and in some situations physical and sexual components, especially in healing from abuse.

Feelings are a component of virtually all human relationships. It is the process of reacting to or responding to someone in a current relationship or situation as if that person has traits, motivations, behaviors, or feelings

of an important someone from the past. It is often based on purely subconscious motivations or can be associated with the important person from the past, a traumatic event, or loss.

In some ways, healing from a traumatic event, a loss, or from sexual abuse may be similar to grief work. While there may be universal stages in the healing process, the healing process is unique and personal. A popular model for grief work that pointed toward acceptance to one's reality was introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The stages have become well known and are often referred to the Five Stages of Grief.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' model describes, in five distinct stages, the process of how people often deal with grief and tragedy. Others have noticed significant personal change or trauma—including sexual abuse—can follow these stages.

The five discrete stages are:

- Denial and isolation – The “No, not me” stage.
- Anger – The “Why me?” stage.
- Bargaining – The “If I do this, you'll do that stage”
- Depression – The “It's really happening” stage.
- Acceptance – The “This is going to happen” or the “This did happen” stage.



Elisabeth Kübler-Ross originally suggested that these stages be applied to the death and dying process. Kübler-Ross also claimed these steps do not necessarily come in order, nor are they all experienced by all people in the same way, though she stated a person will always experience at least two of these stages.

These death and dying stages were quickly transformed into being used for various forms of catastrophic personal loss, such as the death of a loved one, grief, or divorce. Grief professionals often use the concept “Grief Work” to help the bereaved through grief resolution and acceptance of the changes within one's life after such a loss. A common definition of Grief Work is summarized by the acronym TEAR:

- T = To accept the reality of the loss
- E = Experience the reality of the loss
- A = Adjust to the new environment without the lost object/person
- R = Reinvest in the new reality



Perhaps a helpful way of looking at grief is to understand that grief is a common experience or response to a change or loss. Simply put: Change = Loss = Grief. This means that a change of circumstance of any kind produces a loss of some kind (the stage changed from) which will produce a grief reaction.

The intensity of the grief reaction is a function of how the change-produced loss is perceived. If the loss is not perceived as significant, the grief reaction will be minimal or barely felt. Significant grief responses which go unresolved can lead to mental, physical, and sociological problems and contribute to family dysfunction across generations.

In a similar way, while personal and unique, there are common healing stages for those who have been sexually abused. Certainly one way to conceptualize the healing process or stages would be to use Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' well known, Five Stages of Grief or even through the Grief Work acronym TEAR as explained above.

It should be noted that any healing process might hold barriers or impediments to an individual's healing process. Some of these obstructions to healing may include additional trauma, unpredictable flare-ups (conflicts), obsessive thoughts about the past, or circular thinking which is often based on impressions and that are not always factual. Recognizing these personal impediments is an important step in the healing process. This requires honest self-reflection and thought which challenges one to be aware of and admit to one's own behaviors. This honest self-reflection can be painful as one recognizes that they are not the ideal person that they thought they were or tried to be. Therefore, trying to control or redirect one's own reactions and responses is a difficult part of the healing process, but it can be achieved.

The healing process requires great courage, strength, and a strong spiritual connection—which may take its toll on the body as well. One needs a strong commitment to healing, a strong will, a positive attitude, and a willingness to work with their trusted friends and professionals. In part two of this article I will expand on this healing model and discuss another model reflecting the stages of victim, survivors, and thriver.

PART II

Hear my words, O Lord; listen to my sighing. Hear my cry for help, my king, my God! To you I pray, O Lord; at dawn you will hear my cry; at dawn I will plead before you and wait. You are not a god who delights in evil; no wicked person finds refuge with you; the arrogant cannot stand before you. You hate all who do evil; you destroy all who speak falsely. (Psalm 5: 2-6)

In part one of this three-part series I discussed the importance of seeing healing as a process not an event. And that healing is not a simple check list of things that are needed to be accomplished and at the end of which one can say, "I am finished." Rather, healing, of any kind, is a process that takes time, and in some cases, a lifetime.

In the first part of this series, I wrote about Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five discrete stages of death and dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) and how these stages are well suited for various forms of grief work.

Grief is a common experience or response to a change or loss. Simply put: Change = Loss = Grief. This means that: A change of circumstance of any kind produces a loss of some kind (the stage changed from) which will produce a grief reaction. Grief counselors often use a common acronym TEAR:

- T = To accept the reality of the loss
- E = Experience the reality of the loss
- A = Adjust to the new environment without the lost object/person
- R = Reinvest in the new reality

Any grief or healing process can hold barriers or impediments to an individual's healing. Some of these obstructions to healing may include additional grief, trauma, unpredictable flare-ups (conflicts), obsessive thoughts about the past, or circular thinking which is often based on impressions—impressions that are not always factual.





Breaking the silence and secrecy of the abuse often enables the victim to begin to accept the reality of what they experienced or what was done to them and to adjust to the reality that it was not their fault. This often provides an opportunity for them to choose to redirect their energy into life-giving pursuits as opposed to using their energy to hold onto the secret and shame.

Abuse during childhood or adulthood can have a significant impact on one's life including, but not limited to, one's view of self, the world, and the future. The very nature of sexual abuse results in a sense of secrecy, thus often leaving the victim feeling stigmatized and different from others. As victims hold the secret of abuse and often blame themselves for abuse, they carry a negative or "bad" view of themselves. Breaking the secrecy can often lead to dispelling the self-blame and shame and start a healing process where victims become survivors and learn to think about themselves as deserving and worthy human beings.

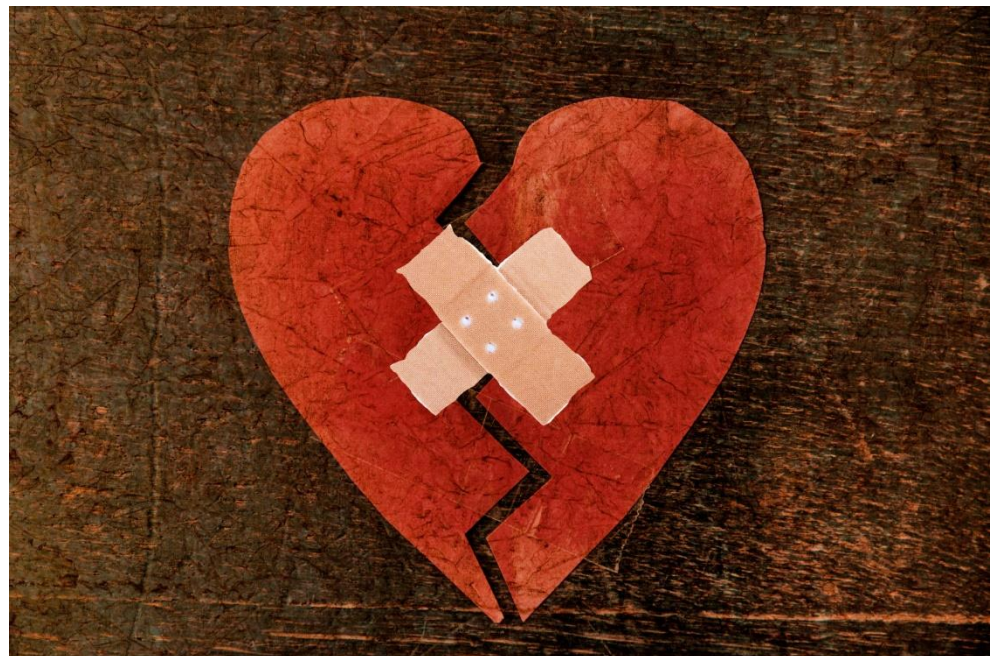
This past summer for the 12th consecutive year I coordinated the Annual Victim Coordinator Conference which drew nearly 120 Victim Coordinators from across the country. One of the speakers was Bro. James Zullo, Ph.D., a Christian Brother and a clinical psychologist. Brother Zullo discussed the healing phases of victims, survivors, and "thrivers" —thriving survivors. This model was initially developed by Melissa Bradley who is a nationally recognized educator and speaker.

In this time-honored model of healing, a distinction is made between victims and survivors, and how they relate to the trauma of being sexually abused.

VICTIMS relate primarily in the present tense with the trauma they experienced. Their primary identity and level of functioning is defined by the trauma.

SURVIVORS relate more in the past tense with the trauma they experienced. Their identity and level of functioning is much greater than the victims', however, a flashback can send the survivor temporarily back to the victim mode.

Victims and Survivors have different healing barriers which are important to address in order for the individual to have the power to move on in their healing process.



During the victim stage the individual may:

- Have issues of safety—feeling unsafe, or threatened;
- Self sooth through self-medicating practices;
- Reenact the feelings associated with the traumatization;
- Seek unhealthy caretaking by others or have poor boundaries;

- Experience triggers or strong emotions that are not being addressed.

During the victim stage the needed support is often physical, emotional, and sexual safety. While there is no true time frame or time limit on any stage this is often the time when an individual is first talking about their abuse and finding their own inner voice and strength. Such empowerment is often found through inner resources such as journaling, reading, and writing; and through outer resources such as talking with family and friends, individual therapy, family counseling, and/or therapeutic support groups.



During the survivor stage the individual may:

- Not have all their needed support people or systems in place;
- Lose or lack commitment or energy to the work of healing;
- Be overwhelmed as the pace is too quick and intense;
- Revert back to self-medicating tendencies;
- Encounter revictimization or traumatic events or experiences.

During the survivor stage it is important for the individual to be patient with themselves and others and realize healing is a process that takes time. During this

time, it is hoped that the individual can develop an awareness of their emotional, spiritual, and physical triggers and implement healthy coping strategies. Healthy supportive relationships often emerge as one's identity becomes more positive and they experience a less intense response from the abuse and trauma they have experienced. While this is often marked by a deep level of integration it is important to be aware that a flashback or a trigger can send the survivor temporarily back to the victim mode, but they slowly are able to recognize these triggers and choose a healthier response. Such empowerment and support often continue to be found through inner resources and awareness.

This movement toward healing takes a tremendous personal commitment of honesty and self-reflection. The movement takes personal awareness and acknowledgement of one's own feelings and behaviors. This honest self-reflection can be a painful process because sometimes one recognizes that they are not the ideal person that they thought there were or tried to be, and a developing need to change is felt. Therefore, healing is an emotional, spiritual, and physical process that takes a lot of time, energy, and commitment, but it can be achieved.

In the third and final part of this series I will write about some of the dimensions of healing and thrivers or thriving survivors. It is important to remember that healing, much like grief is a process, and it takes time and commitment. It is a lot of emotional, spiritual, and physical work. Then again, so too is unhealthy living and avoiding our true inner concerns and conflicts. Hope and healing are possible, but both take commitment and courage.



PART III

I can enter your house because of your great love. I can worship in your holy temple because of my reverence for you, Lord. Guide me in your justice because of my foes; make straight your way before me. Then all who take refuge in you will be glad and forever shout for joy. Protect them that you may be the joy of those who love your name. For you, Lord, bless the just; you surround them with favor like a shield. (Psalm 5: 8-9; 12-13)

The onset of problems following sexual abuse in childhood can be influenced by a number of things including: the age of the child; prior functioning of the child; the degree of coercion and physical threat; the frequency, duration, and extent of the molestation; the length of abuse; the length of time the experience was kept silent; the level of family support following disclosure and the person's resiliency to such horrific experiences. While healing is possible, it takes commitment and work. Some of the dimensions of healing include a support system, emotional, spiritual, interpersonal healing. Such healing cannot be done alone or in isolation.

In the previous article of this three-part series, I wrote about a time-honored model of healing which made a distinction is made between victims and survivors, and how they relate to the trauma of being sexually abused.

VICTIMS relate primarily in the present tense with the trauma they experienced. Their primary identity and level of functioning is defined by the trauma.

SURVIVORS relate more in the past tense with the trauma they experienced. Their identity and level of functioning is much greater than the victims', however, a flashback can send the survivor temporarily back to the victim mode.



I would now like to introduce the term thrivers or thriving survivors as the third part of this model.

THRIVERS or Thriving Survivors have as their main goal to live life, to move beyond the trauma, and to integrate the trauma into the wisdom of the person they have become. While they will never forget what happened, it no longer serves as a defining, limiting experience.

It is important for a thriving survivor of sexual abuse to develop a healthy understanding and expression of their sexuality and relationship needs. Often this includes an awareness and acknowledgment of their emotional, psychological, and spiritual gifts along with a vision of the future. In this sense, a vision of the future would be realistic and plan for certain emotional or spiritual "flare-ups" or adjustment difficulties. Truly, a thriving survivor is busy about living life looking forward after having integrated the past and present. The thriving survivor focuses on not allowing such horrific experiences to emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually define them or paralyze them.

The unpredictable barriers to healthy living often occur suddenly. Such random flare-ups can throw a survivor or thriver into a time-limited crisis. At that time, the feelings of devastation, poor self-image, and sadness can momentarily set someone back. This is when a survivor or a thriving survivor needs their strength to reach out to their trustworthy personal and professional support system. While despair can set in a thriving survivor, they are also able to recognize it and have the ability and courage to conquer it. A change of circumstance of any kind produces a loss of some kind (the stage changed from) which will produce a normal human reaction. Counselors often use a common acronym:

- T = To accept the reality of the loss
- E = Experience the reality of the loss
- A = Adjust to the new environment without the lost object/person
- R = Reinvest in the new reality

For thriving survivors, or anyone, life experiences often hold barriers, impediments, or challenges to healthy living. Some of these obstructions to healthy living may include additional grief, trauma, unpredictable flare-ups (conflicts), obsessive thoughts about the past or present, or circular thinking which is often based on impressions and that are not always factual. All of these obstructions are part of the reality of life and can result in adjustment difficulties including depression or anxiety. A person who has survived a trauma may be predisposed to obstructions or adjustment difficulties to healthy living. However, the more a thriver is able to develop resiliency and integrate their past trauma into their emotional and spiritual life. They are able to admit that their life and development has been changed, not ended.



Breaking the silence and secrecy of the abuse often enables the victim to begin to accept the reality of what they experienced or what was done to them and to adjust to the reality that it was not their fault. This often provides an opportunity for them to choose to reinvest their energy into life giving things as opposed to using their energy to hold the secret and shame. However, it is important to remember that this is a choice that can only be made by the individual.



Regardless of how one conceptualizes healing, healing remains a process and not an event. Healing is not a simple check list of things that are needed to be accomplished. Rather, healing, of any kind, is a process that takes time, and in some cases, a lifetime. But I know from my personal and professional experience that healing is possible. I consider myself a thriving survivor of clerical sexual abuse in part because of the support, assistance, and prayers of many people—including you.

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Why Is There an Office of Safe Environment?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) requires that all Dioceses/Eparchies have in place a Safe Environment Program for the protection of children and young people. The ***“Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People”*** was adopted by the USCCB in June 2002 as a response to sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons, particularly from the time period of 1950 to 2002. The USCCB established an **Office of Child and Youth Protection** to oversee the application of the Charter’s principles and to

create the means for accountability for ensuring implementation of standards.

Reporting

The Diocese encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed.

To Report to Civil Authorities:

Contact your local law enforcement; numbers will vary based on your location. If you believe someone is in immediate danger, call 911.

To confidentially report any incidence of suspected child abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse, contact the West Virginia Bureau for Children and Families' Child Protective Services by calling the Child Abuse Hotline at 800-352-6513.

To Report Abuse by a Bishop of the Catholic Church:

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. We also encourage utilizing www.reportbishopabuse.org to report. If you have reason to believe that a bishop has engaged in sexual misconduct or has interfered with an investigation into sexual misconduct, please contact civil authorities in the applicable jurisdiction and visit www.reportbishopabuse.org.



To the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston:

The Diocese encourages reporting to the appropriate civil authorities first and foremost as well as to the appropriate church authorities. To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by clergy, religious or lay personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, please contact one of the Bishop's designees at 1-888-434-6237: Bryan Minor, ext. 263; Tim Bishop, ext. 353; Very Rev. Dennis R. Schuelkens Jr., V.E., ext. 270; or please call the Office of Safe Environment at 304.230.1504.

You may also fill out a confidential "Complaint Form for Allegations of Sexual Abuse of a Minor." The Complaint Form is available for download at www.dwc.org, click Offices, then Safe Environment and click the "Download Files and Forms" section. It is listed as "Complaint Form."

To report to the Diocese's **Victim Assistance Coordinator** call Dr. Patricia M. Bailey: 304-242-6988



The Three Components of Compliance

The Safe Environment Program by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston consists of the following three components:

- ✓ Background Check
- ✓ Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children
- ✓ Awareness training for adults (VIRTUS online or live training)

All three components are mandated by the Diocese for persons seeking employment or

seeking to volunteer directly or indirectly with children. A person is considered in compliance with the Diocese's Safe Environment Policy upon successful completion of all three components. Every year, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston - as well as all other dioceses in the United States - is audited by the USCCB for compliance with its "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." The Diocese also convenes a lay-led Review Board that meets regularly to review all Safe Environment matters and ensure adherence to the Safe Environment process, including reporting to civil authorities.



Teaching Safety

A Student Awareness Program has been implemented since the fall of 2005 to give children information (appropriate for their age levels) and skills to help recognize acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and how to effectively deal with those behaviors. This is a VIRTUS program called “**Teaching Safety**” (the program used to be called “Touching Safety” but was updated this past year). The program is taught in Catholic schools and as part of Parish Schools of Religion. This program offers lesson plans for children in grades Kindergarten through 12.

The “Teaching Safety” lesson cycle for this year is:

School Year **2021-22** ... **Lesson THREE** and **Lesson FOUR** ... Lesson Three should be taught by the end of October. Lesson Four should be taught by the end of the school year. If you are teaching both lessons together (our Catholic schools are as COVID remains a factor), please teach both lessons as soon as possible but no later than the end of October.

Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse, St. Mary’s Church, Prayer Service for Victims

Many survivors of sexual abuse suffer in silence for years, wrestling alone with the agony of their memories and pain. We pray that the Church may always be a place where they can come to share their stories, be received in love and compassion, and be supported on the path to healing. We pray to the Lord.

The experience of sexual abuse may leave scars no less profound than the scars of a scourging, though they often remain unseen. We must strive to make our parish communities places where survivors can feel safe to share their burdens and to find healing and peace. We pray to the Lord.

Those who have survived sexual abuse may feel isolated from the community, set apart and unwelcome. Jesus must have felt the same as the soldiers mocked and tortured him. As members of Christ’s Body, the Church, we are called to see Christ in our brothers and sisters in need and offer them our aid, comfort, and support. We pray to the Lord.

Simon helped Jesus carry his cross, helping him bear the weight and the burden. So must we help survivors of sexual abuse bear the weight and burden of their experiences, helping them to find healing God who is light and life. We pray to the Lord.

We commend into God’s hands all those who are at risk for sexual abuse, those who are doing the hard work of healing, and those who are not yet ready to begin the healing process. Through our prayers, efforts, and sacrifices, may they come to know the peace and wholeness that only God can bring. We pray to the Lord.

Lord hear our prayer.

